

CREATURES OF CLAY



BY LADY VIOLET GREVILLE

MORLEY'S UNIVERSAL LIBRARY.

ORDER OF PUBLICATION:

1. SHERIDAN'S PLAYS.
 2. PLAYS FROM MOLIERE. By English Dramatists.
 3. MARLOWE'S FAUSTUS AND GOETHE'S FAUST.
 4. CHRONICLE OF THE CID.
 5. RABELAIS' GARGANTUA, AND THE HEROIC DEEDS
OF PANTAGRUEL.
 6. THE PRINCE. By Machiavelli.
 7. BACON'S ESSAYS.
 8. DE FOE'S JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR.
 9. LOCKE ON TOLERATION AND ON CIVIL GOVERN-
MENT; WITH SIR ROBERT FILMER'S PATRI-
ARCHA.
 10. BUTLER'S ANALOGY OF RELIGION.
 11. DRYDEN'S VIRGIL.
 12. SIR WALTER SCOTT'S DEMONOLOGY AND WITCH-
CRAFT.
-

GEORGE ROUTLEDGE AND SONS,
LONDON AND NEW YORK.

MORLEY'S UNIVERSAL LIBRARY.

ORDER OF PUBLICATION:

13. HERRICK'S HESPERIDES.
14. COLERIDGE'S TABLE TALK : WITH THE ANCIENT MARINER AND CHRISTABEL.
15. BOCCACCIO'S DECAMERON.
16. STERNE'S TRISTRAM SHANDY.
17. HOMER'S ILIAD, Translated by George Chapman.
18. MEDIÆVAL TALES.
19. JOHNSON'S RASSELAS, AND VOLTAIRE'S CANDIDE.
20. PLAYS AND POEMS BY BEN JONSON.
21. HOBBS'S LEVIATHAN.
22. BUTLER'S HUDIBRAS.
23. IDEAL COMMONWEALTHS : MORE'S UTOPIA ;
BACON'S NEW ATLANTIS ; AND CAMPANELLA'S
CITY OF THE SUN.
24. CAVENDISH'S LIFE OF WOLSEY.
- 25 and 26. DON QUIXOTE (Two Volumes).
27. BURLESQUE PLAYS AND POEMS.

GEORGE ROUTLEDGE AND SONS,
LONDON AND NEW YORK.

CREATURES OF CLAY

A NOVEL

BY

LADY VIOLET GREVILLE

AUTHOR OF

‘ZOE,’ ‘KEITH’S WIFE,’ ‘THE SECRET OF BARRAVOE,’ ETC.

‘Ye children of man! Whose life is a span,
Protracted with sorrow from day to day,
Naked and featherless, feeble and querulous,
Sickly, calamitous Creatures of Clay.’

ARISTOPHANES

LONDON
GEORGE ROUTLEDGE AND SONS
BROADWAY, LUDGATE HILL
NEW YORK: 9 LAFAYETTE PLACE

1885

ROUTLEDGES' RAILWAY LIBRARY.

RECENT VOLUMES.

Two Shillings each, fancy boards.

IN THE WEST COUNTRY.

By MAY CROMMELIN.

THE ROYAL HIGHLANDERS.

By JAMES GRANT.

NINETY-THREE.

By VICTOR HUGO.

MY LADY GREEN SLEEVES.

By HELEN MATHERS.

THE RED RAG.

By R. MOUNTENEY-JEPHSON.

MISS DAISY DIMITY

By MAY CROMMELIN.

'CHERRY RIPE!'

By HELEN MATHERS.

CONTENTS.



CHAPTER	PAGE
I. FOILED - - - - -	5
II. AN OLD FRIEND - - - - -	16
III. COUSINLY AFFECTION - - - - -	22
IV. THE FAMILY LAWYER - - - - -	27
V. MAUD ANTICIPATES - - - - -	31
VI. LUCE WINDERMERE - - - - -	38
VII. A RELUCTANT CANDIDATE - - - - -	45
VIII. THE PEARL NECKLACE - - - - -	54
IX. A NICE GIRL - - - - -	60
X. THE MEETING IN THE TOWN HALL - - - - -	66
XI. 'GRANNY' - - - - -	72
XII. THE BLACK MARE - - - - -	79
XIII. LUCE IS COY - - - - -	85
XIV. JULIAN FINDS AN AGREEABLE GIRL - - - - -	90
XV. MRS. VINCENT IS ANNOYED - - - - -	100
XVI. WAS IT LOVE? - - - - -	105
XVII. GRANNY'S REMINISCENCES - - - - -	113
XVIII. LADY FENCHURCH RECEIVES A LETTER - - - - -	120
XIX. DICK ACCEPTS A TRUST - - - - -	130
XX. AMONGST CHIFFONS - - - - -	136
XXI. A STUDENT'S COUNSEL - - - - -	143
XXII. BACK AGAIN AT HIGHVIEW - - - - -	150
XXIII. LUCE VISITS GRANNY - - - - -	156
XXIV. JULIAN PREACHES PATIENCE - - - - -	164
XXV. A LOVER'S TRYST - - - - -	169
XXVI. WHAT LADY FENCHURCH SAID - - - - -	176
XXVII. A COUNTRY DINNER-PARTY - - - - -	183
XXVIII. WHAT LADY FENCHURCH DID - - - - -	188
XXIX. SIR HILARY'S REVENGE - - - - -	193
XXX. LOVERS NO LONGER - - - - -	201
XXXI. BRUCE FEELS LONELY - - - - -	207

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXXII. MRS. VINCENT DECIDES FOR HERSELF - -	214
XXXIII. LADY ELEANOR IS CAPTIOUS - -	220
XXXIV. MISS FENCHURCH LECTURES - -	226
XXXV. MR. DEWSNAP ADVISES - -	232
XXXVI. THE DOCTOR TELLS A WHITE LIE - -	239
XXXVII. LUCE PROMISES - -	245
XXXVIII. SIR HILARY SURPRISES EVERYONE - -	251
XXXIX. GRANNY SLEEPS - -	257
XL. WHERE ALL IS STILL - -	265
XLI. LUCE HEARS SOMETHING - -	271
XLII. LOVERS' PARTING - -	278
XLIII. LADY ELEANOR IS VEXED - -	286
XLIV. A PRETTY WIDOW - -	291
XLV. BRUCE HAS A DREAM - -	298
XLVI. BRUCE TAKES A LITTLE RECREATION - -	303
XLVII. LUCE TORMENTS HERSELF - -	311
XLVIII. A MODERN COURTSHIP - -	315
XLIX. BRUCE FORGETS HIMSELF - -	322
L. LEAP YEAR - -	328
LI. A SADDER AND A WISER MAN - -	335
LII. DICK GROWS HEROIC - -	340
LIII. LADY FENCHURCH RECEIVES A SHOCK - -	347
LIV. MRS. VINCENT MEDITATES - -	353
LV. FOOLISH LONGINGS - -	356
LVI. MISS FENCHURCH PREPARES FOR COMPANY - -	363
LVII. THE OLD BUTLER MAKES A DISCOVERY - -	367
LVIII. LAVENDER - -	375
LIX. FAITHFUL - -	381

CREATURES OF CLAY.



CHAPTER I.

FOILED.

IT was August in London, dull, hot, stifling weather, when the sky looks brazen, the prematurely faded yellow leaves begin to flutter and fall from the grimy trees in the parks, and the streets become dusty and ill-odorous. Dirty bits of paper fly up and about in the scorching sirocco-like air, everybody of any importance is out of town ; the blinds of fashionable houses are closed, and the care-takers go about in curl-papers and slippers.

On such a day a young man, morosely chewing at a cigar, sat in the window of one of the few West End clubs that was not shut up in consequence of cleaning or repairs. He had a bright, fair, young, English face, which at that instant wore an evil expression of angry despair, evidently foreign to its character. After a few moments of sullen reflection, the young man rose and walked to the chimney-piece, against which he rested his forehead gloomily.

‘I say, Dick,’ exclaimed another young man who was reading the paper at a little distance, ‘why don’t you answer? I asked you if you knew that Evelyn Bray, the girl we met at the Milners’ in the summer, that time at Henley, you know, when we had such jolly water-parties, was just married to old Sir Hilary Fenchurch?’

‘I didn’t know it till you read out the news just now,’ answered his friend sullenly.

‘She was very good-looking,’ mused the other ; ‘and I suppose she thinks she has made a good thing of it, for I believe she is an orphan without a penny—seems rather a pity though, doesn’t it? He must be old enough for her father.’

‘Rather a pity ! I should just think it was ; it’s *disgusting* to see a girl sell herself like that.’

'Oh well, my dear fellow, it doesn't do to be too hard upon them, poor things; it is their profession, you know, like the army for me——'

'A vile profession!' said Dick vindictively.

'What a bad temper you are in to-day; what's the matter, eh?' said the other, stretching himself more luxuriously in his deep arm-chair, and extending a languid hand to the glass of iced lemon and soda-water that stood on a little table beside him. 'Tailor sent your bill in, or lost at Goodwood, eh?'

'Neither. I'm only sick of the folly of the life we lead; what's the good of it all? How long will it last? Women cheat, men lie and rob you, and—it's confoundedly hot.'

'So it is, but you can't reform the world; get as much fun as you can out of it—that's my maxim—and don't fuss yourself.'

'*You* never fussed yourself, I'm sure,' sneered Dick.

'Never. It don't pay.'

'I should like to know what *does* pay. Fellows grumble at the army, the navy, their wives, their people—everything.'

'At least *you* can't grumble. You have all that a man can want, nothing to do, splendid prospects, and a grandmother who will stand you any amount of money.'

Dick was silent. The bitterness he felt was too deep for words. Presently he quitted the club and his contented friend, who, left in solitude, dropped off into peaceful slumbers for the rest of the afternoon, and woke up, cool and refreshed, just in time for dinner. Dick, on the contrary, once in the street, walked on quickly, regardless of the heat, until he reached his lodgings, where he set to work energetically to pack a portmanteau.

Dick Carrol was a spoilt favourite of fortune. He had been brought up by an adoring grandmother, and pampered by society, who beheld in him the possible heir to a large fortune. He had scarcely ever been contradicted, and never knew what it was to receive the thing expressed by that salutary but disagreeable figure of speech, a slap in the face. Dick now, for the first time in his life, was hopelessly, stupidly, wretchedly in love. And having informed his goddess of this condition of things, which ought to have made some impression upon her heart, he was forced to read of her marriage to another, an elderly, common-place country baronet. Not only therefore was she unfaithful and unappreciative, but she was also mercenary. Dick, maddened and impetuous, resolved to revenge himself. He would wildly pursue, would taunt, upbraid and

dismay her. The newspaper informed him that the happy couple were gone to Switzerland (happy couple indeed!) Dick ground his teeth: he saw it was not a large country on the map; he would scour the country, search every hotel, and find them. In this frame of mind he left England, and, soon enough, came upon the traces of his beloved and unfaithful mistress.

Meanwhile, Sir Hilary and Lady Fenchurch had been married a fortnight, and the time allotted to the honeymoon, which, according to the roving habits of the English people, they had been spending in Switzerland, was nearly exhausted. The link that bound husband and wife together was partly new and partly old. Evelyn Bray, the orphan daughter of a poor gentleman, had lived with her guardian, Sir Hilary Fenchurch, and his sister, for several years, until the time appointed for the ratification of the solemn promise Sir Hilary had made to her dying father arrived, and he had claimed her for his wife. Evelyn made no objection; Sir Hilary was about thirty years older than herself, but he was a kindly as well as a rich man, and she had been brought up to value her future position, and to consult his habits and wishes. She was docile and gentle, not particularly imaginative, and possessed all the woman's love of luxuries and comforts. She only vaguely realized the irrevocability of the marriage tie, nor did she anticipate any great or pleasurable result from the change in her condition. Once married, Sir Hilary treated her in his usual fashion, pleasantly, considerately, with a tinge of old-fashioned courtly deference in his manner, which was rather flattering to a young creature, but with none of a lover's warmth. Evelyn was grateful to him for this concession, for the sight of an amorous middle-aged man disporting himself in fond caresses is a somewhat disagreeable spectacle, and, though Lady Fenchurch entertained a calm affection for Sir Hilary, any exhibition of passion on his part would only have alarmed and disgusted her. Those persons who were staying in the pleasantly picturesque mountain resort where Sir Hilary and his wife elected to pass a few days observed the new-married couple walking up and down, arm in arm, in the early morning (while Sir Hilary drank a couple of glasses of some nauseous water, recommended by the doctors for his periodical attacks of gout), and noticed with surprise the happy union of December and May. Yet, as every bright thing has its reverse, so when Evelyn remained alone, and Sir Hilary took a longer or steeper pedestrian stretch, the placid expression of her face underwent

a considerable change. At such times she would wander into some solitary part of the woods, nominally intent on sketching purposes, in reality a prey to disagreeable thoughts. For she then recalled to her mind an episode of the last few months which she had not confided to Sir Hilary, and which, though it left her outward circumstances unchanged, considerably modified her inner life. While on a visit to a friend, but a few weeks before her marriage, she met a handsome young man. They walked and talked together in the intimacy of country-house life, grew to understand and appreciate each other, until one day he told her he loved her. And she, hearing such strange and pleasant words, and for a moment forgetting the rigid future in store for her, including Sir Hilary and the comfortable settlement to which she was destined, listened eagerly. Listened to the detriment of her peace and the loss of her self-respect, yet with the lightness of her age and sex snatching at the forbidden pleasure, and drinking in the words of flattering love. Then, woman-like, when her lover pressed her to throw off the conventional shackles that bound her, she dared not, and, true to neither, married one man while her heart was given to another. Powerless and disinclined to forget a part of which she was now ashamed, she weakly feared to speak of this to her husband. For, she argued, what was there to tell? She had sent her lover away, assured him that what he asked was impossible, that he must never think of her, that he must never again see her—in short, all the pretty insincere vows and protestations that women hard pressed are wont to utter. She left the house, feeling she had acted honourably; she heard no more of him, and believed he had forgotten her, yet, strangely enough, indeed, this last thought increased her regret. Occasionally, overcome by temptation, she would put down her drawing materials, and, leaning her head on her hand as she sat among the cool green ferns and mosses, think of the past with tearful sorrow; then, after a little, remembering Sir Hilary, bestir herself and walk home, her hollow eyes and pale cheeks rising up as witnesses against her. This was certainly an uncomfortable and a useless way of passing a honeymoon, and poor Evelyn sometimes feared that Sir Hilary, plain and practical as he was, might suspect something unusual. At other times her speculations led her to wonder aimlessly where her lover might be, and if he had really consoled himself for her loss with his pretty cousin Maud, to whom the world's gossip already married him; but when they reached this point her speculations invariably ended in tears. Even the most

heroically prudish woman does not like to feel that she is forgotten. By dint of musing over these sad and hopeless reminiscences Evelyn attained to a gentle melancholy and an uncontrollable desire to see once more, if only to take a pathetic farewell of him, the hero of her dreams. One afternoon especially, when she had plunged as usual into the recesses of the pine-woods and walked listlessly to a spot whence she could see range upon range of distant snow-capped peaks melting into a dim blue distance or standing out sharply against the clear sky, silent and wonderful in their majesty, the longing to see Dick grew more intense than ever, and she permitted her thoughts to stray back to those bright halcyon days of love-making which now seemed to her so precious, but which at the time she had not sufficiently valued. They were irrevocably gone, no longings could recall them; why might she not therefore retrace that happy time as if it concerned some one else and not herself? Thinking thus, she mused luxuriously in a kind of melancholy rapture, and was scarcely surprised to see before her the object of her thoughts, who after severe travelling had discovered her abode, and followed her in her solitary walk. She felt pleased and yet a little frightened. Such a pursuit scarcely argued forgetfulness, and though agreeable to dream of a lover it might not be so easy to deal with him in flesh and blood. Dick left London with the intention of indulging in a series of melodramatic reproaches; instead, as he saw the startled face of a pretty girl before him, he threw himself down beside her, and, taking her hand gently, said 'Evelyn!' Love was more prominent than reproach in this adjuration, and as to revenge he had totally forgotten its existence.

'Evelyn, why have you behaved so cruelly? Why did you marry another man when I loved you and you knew it?'

Youth always considers its own rights first.

'I said that our love—your love—was wrong and foolish,' stammered Evelyn.

'I can't see that; you were not obliged to marry Sir Hilary.'

'I could not help it, our engagement had lasted so long. Papa wished it, and on his deathbed Sir Hilary promised him he would marry me, and I——'

'And for some silly idea of duty you have spoilt my life and yours. I never believed you really meant it; I thought that, if I gave you time and did not worry you, you would understand—would relent. I loved you, Evelyn, and when a

man loves he deserves some consideration,' said Dick reproachfully.

'Indeed, I am very sorry.'

'*Very sorry!* you speak like a little school-girl; didn't you love me?'

'Well—you said so; the coquette in her nature asserted itself.

'You might at least have waited a bit, have given a fellow some chance.'

'There was no use in waiting.'

'Everything would have come right if you had only waited,' he argued again impatiently.

'Yes, but I could not,' she said softly.

'You were very cruel.'

'Cruel to myself, don't you think I suffered? but then I knew it was right.'

'Right, right! you women only think of yourselves; what a man feels is nothing. If you had only trusted me, instead of sending me away—to read your marriage one day in a newspaper.'

'But Sir Hilary?'

'Hang Sir Hilary! What a situation for you!—a prim old fellow, who will just be as fond of the Board of Guardians or of his turnips as of his wife; who won't understand you or share your pleasures.'

'He is very kind,' she whispered, trying to palliate to her conscience the sin of hearing her husband's character discussed.

'Can you not believe that I should have been kinder?'

Tears stood in Evelyn's eyes. She was pitying herself, and imagining what immeasurable bliss Dick's affection would have afforded her. He saw his advantage.

'Do you not know that men have strong passions, that they can feel? Ay! as you never felt in your life, hedged in by all your tepid ideas of duty and sentiment.'

'Oh, Dick! forgive me—forget me.'

'Forget you! and if I cannot? if you're the first woman I ever really loved?—if you seem to have taken away my very heart with you?—if—oh! I cannot bear it, Evelyn! I came all this way just to see you, just to tell you, for once, what I think of you—of a girl who plays with a man as you did! You *shall* hear!' he emphasized, as she tried to rise. 'I loved you, and you jilted me for a rich old man.'

'Oh! Dick! Dick! how can you?' she cried, fairly frightened

now, and wondering how she should get rid of him. 'I could not help it—indeed, I could not if I loved you.'

'You loved me !—you love me still !—you're *miserable* ! I'm glad you're miserable, Lady Fenchurch !'

He jumped up and stood over her, lashing himself into a rage as he spoke. Her head sank lower and lower ; she picked nervously with her fingers at the tiny grasses. She was a little ashamed, and not a little alarmed.

'Do not let us reproach each other,' she said quietly, though her heart beat fast. 'We have been rudely parted, I know ; and I assure you I have suffered bitterly ; but I will try to bear my burden, and you must try to bear yours—for my sake, please.'

Her voice faltered. He looked at her first angrily, then kindly, then triumphantly. He thought he saw the weakness in the strength she tried to assume.

'For *your* sake ! Women always say that.'

'The loss of a woman, after all, is nothing in a man's life. You are a noble fellow ; you are sure to do what is right ; forget——'

She could say no more. The tears rushed to her eyes, yet she felt a sense of pride almost as great as if she had won a victory. He threw himself again beside her, and pressed her hand in his.

'Evelyn, these heroics are absurd. Why shouldn't we be happy ? why should our life be spoiled ? You have been married through a terrible misunderstanding ; you could not help it, I know, but you will *never* love Sir Hilary—never be happy. Come with me—come. I will love you and care for you !'

She put out her hands as if to keep him off, and shrank away ; she had no desire to outrage society.

'No, no ! not that ; never say that again. Such things are nonsense,' she said.

'Nonsense ! Ah, I thought you could not love me,' he said gloomily. 'Yet I cannot bear to see you wretched all your life.'

'I shall not be wretched, she said, with a little forced laugh ; 'I mean to enjoy myself, to be very good ; Sir Hilary is most indulgent.'

'You don't love me, and I was a fool to think so,' he said angrily.

'It *must* be as I said, Dick,' she answered severely ; 'you know it must.'

‘Must be—must be!’ muttered the young man impatiently, feeling, for the first time in his life, an impracticable barrier opposed to his wishes. ‘Of course, it is for you to decide; if you tell me of your own free will to go, I *must*; but—’

‘I do tell you—I wish it.’

He looked at her keenly. Her voice sounded firm and clear; she evidently meant it. *His* happiness was nothing to her; she had chosen her own line, and intended to keep to it. After all, perhaps she was right; there would be complications—and men did not die of love. Still he hesitated; she was so beautiful; no woman had ever appeared to him so beautiful before, and he was unaccustomed to be jilted. The circumstances were usually reversed; girls had cared hopelessly for *him*, and he had never given them a thought.

‘Evelyn! Evelyn! pray reflect! you cannot send me away so.’ No answer. She was very pale, and yet much calmer than, in his infatuation, he would have expected. He rose slowly to his feet, waiting for her to speak. ‘I am going,’ he said. ‘Haven’t you a word for me? Won’t you change your mind, darling? I *do* love you so!’

She rose also, and held out her hand, turning away her head.

‘Good-bye—forgive me,’ she said quietly.

Then he jerked away her hand, and in another instant the crashing of the bushes told her he was gone. Pale and trembling, she steadied herself against the trunk of a pine-tree, thoroughly exhausted and unnerved. The sweet wild pink scented the air with its fragrance, and the silver tinkle of the cowbells sounded merrily from the valley, but she saw and felt nothing. Her heart seemed to stand still, and a great veil of darkness obscured her sight. How hard it had been to convince him! what a pang it had cost her! Presently, as in a dream, she walked on. The sun had set quite suddenly, as happens in mountainous regions, and the hills, but recently bathed in gleams of roseate light, were now a sombre violet; a small pale evening star twinkled above, and the air was tinged with a sharp and frosty coolness. She felt benumbed morally and physically, and the chill air revived her.

When she reached home she found Sir Hilary waiting and somewhat anxious. He gently chid her for staying out so late, and her conscience smote her as she saw that he looked pale and worried. If he had but known on what a thread her future happiness still hung!

‘The papers are come,’ he said, looking as unlike a jealous

husband as possible. 'Sit down here ; you will like to read them.'

Gladly hailing this as a relief from conversation, she sat down, until by degrees she was able to control her nervousness and the tremulous tones of her voice.

In the morning a note was handed her by the chambermaid. It contained only a few lines :

'You have willed it so. I leave to-morrow. Still I give you one chance more before I go. (I know not *where*, to do *what* ! Give myself to the devil, I suppose.) Evelyn, do you really wish me to leave you ? If not, send me a line to the hotel, where I shall wait all day.

'Yours till death,
'D.'

Evelyn crumpled the paper together in her hands when she had read it. 'Why does he try to tempt me, and make me run such risks ?' she cried. 'It is cruel, shameful !' Yet many a time during that dreadfully long, hot day did she feel inclined to waver, to be a flirt, and to say, 'Come back ; do not leave me ; be my friend.'

Surely, she might at least have kept him as a friend—she was innocent of all wrong-doing, and determined to continue to act honestly ; but the sight of his countenance would have been pleasant ; why need she deny herself that happiness ? Once she seized a pen and began to write, then, dropping it, buried her face in her hands. 'Oh ! how weak I am ! how wicked !' She glanced at the clock and thought the day interminable ; it was kind, at least, of Sir Hilary to leave her alone and prolong his constitutional beyond the usual limits—soon, very soon, the feverish hours would pass, and she would regain calm and quiet again.

Outside every-day life proceeded merrily—carts and carriages rattled along, drivers cracked their whips with a will, bells jingled, and dust bepowdered the red carnations at the window and flew lightly into the room.

Three o'clock, four o'clock, dusk, then evening came. Evelyn lay on the sofa. Her head ached. Meantime Dick, half mad with rage and disappointment, sat biting at a cigar, and listening to every sound in the hotel. To the very last he hoped and believed in his influence over her. She had seemed so affectionate, so pliable, before her marriage, that he could not realize the sudden change. He never considered what was to follow, or what their lives would have been in the future ; he never

asked himself these questions ; he was young and sanguine, and he loved her. That was enough. Occasionally, indeed, he remorsefully remembered his grandmother, who bestowed on him a handsome allowance, whose heir he was supposed to be, and who had hitherto proved invariably indulgent to all his follies. She was old, and the shock might harm her, kill her perhaps. No, no, he said to himself ; he would manage her, talk to her : old folks were not so sensitive ; she would forgive him, and they would all be happy eventually. Then as the hours flew by he grew angry. Evelyn was selfish, she did not love him ; she must always have intended to deceive him ; she told him of her engagement, certainly, but he had never believed her marriage to be so near and so irrevocable. The news dealt his hopes and his vanity a severe blow. He had undertaken a long journey, counting on his influence over her, and it had proved useless. No wonder he was angry, disappointed, and miserable.

Night merged into morning, yet she did not write. What a fool he was to have believed in, to have cared for her ! It proved that women were, as men had often said in his hearing, only heartless coquettes. Never again would he love. Then, with a great revulsion of feeling, he began to question whether his passion had been of so durable, so intense a nature. He was very young, and life with all its possibilities lay before him ; perhaps, on the whole, it was best for him so, best that she had not consented to his prayer. He was still free ! Then, almost with joy and a great longing to shake the soil of the hateful place from his feet, he departed.

The dust and hubbub of his travelling-carriage reached the room where Evelyn lay, wakefully tormenting herself with sad thoughts ; but no presentiment warned her that the crisis in her fate was passed, and that henceforth a new chapter of her life would begin.

In such rude fashion ended Evelyn's honeymoon, and in October the newly married pair returned to Oakdene—Evelyn quietly taking on pretty little matronly airs, and Sir Hilary seemingly ruddy and cheerful among his partridges and his turnips.

With the kind of sensation as though she had dropped down to earth from some fair fairyland, Evelyn took up existence as she had left it, listened to Miss Fenchurch's long, pointless monologues, walked down the silent oaken galleries, passed through the unused drawing-room, shrouded in holland covers and fragrant with a faint smell of potpourri and camphor, held colloquies with the housekeeper over jams and preserves, and heard herself called distantly ' My lady ' by familiar voices who

had hitherto said 'Miss Evelyn.' Everything was quite the same, and yet really everything was quite different. Miss Fenchurch formally resigned the keys and no longer made tea at breakfast, an arrangement which enabled her to knit indefatigably during the meal ; but the gust of passion had passed over Evelyn's soul, and she could not forget. To herself she was still Evelyn, not Lady Fenchurch, and no formal ceremony of resigning keys could force the fact upon her.

'She moped,' Miss Fenchurch said. 'It was sad for a married woman to sit about reading novels and dreaming away half the day. Let her take some exercise.'

'Hunting?' suggested Sir Hilary cheerily.

'Certainly not ! what are you thinking of, my dear brother ? A married woman—most injurious to the health.' Sir Hilary subsided with a conscious chuckle.

Evelyn flamed out, 'Why not, pray ? why should I not ? I love riding, Hilary ; I will go out hunting with you to-morrow.'

Miss Fenchurch shook her head, and Sir Hilary, puzzled, glanced from one to the other.

A considerable portion of Evelyn's time was occupied by the never-ending callers, who, partly impelled by curiosity and partly for want of something to do, inflicted themselves on the young bride. They had known her for years as Evelyn Bray, but Evelyn Fenchurch possessed the charm of novelty. Each person reported what kind of dress she was wearing, what wedding presents lay on the table, whether the jewellery displayed was handsome or betokened stinginess on the part of Sir Hilary, regretting that the family diamonds, of course, could only be seen to advantage at the next county ball. How Lady Fenchurch bore herself, whether she looked happy, why the marriage had been celebrated in perfect privacy in town, and whether she had improved in looks, afforded food for much gossip and a great deal of very agreeable tea-drinking. Opinions were divided as to whether she would be an addition to the county society or not. Of course, if she entertained and spent some of the money which Sir Hilary had hitherto so carefully hoarded, it would be well enough. Did he intend to stand for Parliament, and would his wife make herself popular, were the further questions the county asked itself, and to which it eagerly awaited the answers.

CHAPTER II.

AN OLD FRIEND.

DICK went into Italy, dawdled away a fortnight at Venice, took a run down to Rome, and discovered, with surprise, that foreign travel was in no ways distracting. Disgusted and sore at heart, he returned to England. The first person he stumbled up against in London was his cousin, Maud Hardfast, whose joy at meeting him was at least refreshing. Though a very handsome girl, she had not succeeded in making a match, and it occurred to her that Dick was a chance not to be thrown away. Partly owing to her own talents as an accomplished flirt, and partly to her mother's straitened circumstances, the two women were regarded by society in the light of hawks ready to swoop down on any marriageable young man, and were universally exposed to detraction by their own sex accordingly. To be 'skied' at the Academy, to write poems which nobody will read, to breed cattle who die of pleuro-pneumonia the week before the show at which in all likelihood they must have taken prizes, are bitter things indeed, yet not more fraught with bitterness than the feelings of a hawked-about girl, who displays her wares in vain, and leaves London, season after season, ticketed 'unsaleable.' So Maud's face brightened as she beheld her cousin, and thought that there was still some hope of her obtaining a desirable husband.

'Where do you come from? What luck to find you in town?' she said sweetly.

'I've come from Dover,' he answered rather ungraciously, hating to be cross-questioned. 'I've been travelling abroad.'

But Maud knew men's ways. She soon smoothed down his ruffled features, and by gentle means drove away his ill-temper, with the result that he promised to visit her mother on the morrow.

Dick felt terribly bored, with the ennui that comes from a total want of any interest in life, and almost any distraction seemed good to him at that moment. So in an ardourless and yet expectant mood he presented himself at Mrs. Hardfast's house. It was part of the latter's principles never to parade economy in any shape; her house was as daintily furnished, her chintzes as fresh, her muslin curtains as snowy as possible; if the servants complained of scanty wages, hard work, and numerous petty makeshifts, and if stinginess were practised in secret, yet nothing of this was evident to Mrs. Hardfast's friends. The ladies dined out a great deal, and when there

came no invitations contented themselves with a slender tea and food that a pampered footman would have rejected. But then Maud's ball-dresses were beautiful, and her mother prided herself on being a wondrous manager. The cool atmosphere of the little drawing-room formed a delightful contrast on this broiling September day; sweet-smelling flowers filled innumerable glasses on the table, and Maud herself, dressed in the airiest and lightest of garments, radiated smiles and amiability. After the soul-tempests Dick had undergone, and the gradual conviction that was stealing over him that he had made an egregious fool of himself, it suited him to talk of nothings, and fling about the light ball of flimsy society talk. Maud knew all the gossip, and had a perfect store of amusing bits of scandal to relate, so that the time passed pleasantly, and he found little hesitation in staying for five-o'clock tea, then staying on to dinner, finally promising to call again on the morrow. Maud was a wise girl in her generation; she showed him nothing but the frankest cordiality, without a spice of coquetry, and soon restored him to good humour and a belief in himself, not one of the least remarkable results of a clever woman's tact. Things continued on this footing, Maud gradually edging herself into his confidence, and resuming her cousinly authority, which had been, to some extent, shaken during his infatuation for Lady Fenchurch. She made herself necessary to him, used him as a friend, adviser, and companion, and flattered his tastes and vanity. 'He is a wary bird,' she said to herself once, glancing at her handsome bold features reflected in the chimney-glass; 'but I think I am a match for him.'

Mrs. Hardfast on these occasions found endless work in her household occupations, and gracefully apologized for leaving the young people alone. Her absence was a boon to Dick, who was learning to appreciate the pleasant dallying with a pretty woman, and a machinery of companionship so carefully adjusted that not a jar or a hitch came to break the agreeable and even monotony. He was aimless and objectless, and shrank nervously from going to his grandmother's, where he was now long overdue; while Maud, working on this reluctance, took every opportunity of impressing on him that in society alone, and in her society above all, could be found real satisfaction. One day Mrs. Hardfast, who possessed an only son, a spoiled boy of about eleven, consulted Dick, now installed as the intimate friend of the family, about his education. She had heard of a classical tutor, an Oxford man, highly recommended, whose terms were moderate, and she wondered if

Dick would really be so kind as to go and see him. Dick, now in a mood of universal obligingness, promised, and set out for the address given. After a lengthy drive he knocked at a small house standing in a pretty little garden in the outskirts of London. The door was opened to him by a lady

‘Is Mr. Bruce at home?’ he asked doubtfully.

‘Oh, yes,’ said the lady, with a toss of her head, and a glance of approval at Dick’s appearance. ‘Pray step in here.’

Dick, believing her to be the tutor’s wife, marvelled at his choice. ‘Mrs. Bruce, I presume?’ he said.

‘Oh dear no!’ laughed the lively little lady, her big black eyes sparkling, and her parted lips displaying an even row of white teeth. ‘Mr. Bruce is a bachelor, and I am his landlady, Mrs. Flinks.’

‘Indeed! and a very charming one, Mrs. Flinks,’ responded Dick gallantly.

‘Single gentlemen are easy to please,’ said the landlady reflectively, posing her head on one side in the attitude of a young person on the lid of a French plum-box, ‘though to be sure I never was brought up to let lodgings, and it does go against the grain; my poor pa would never have believed I should come to this. But there, you want to see Mr. Bruce—a college friend I presume—and of course my blighted life is of no moment to you.’

‘Your conversation is most attractive, but you see I have business with Mr. Bruce.’

‘Exactly so; I will acquaint him with it at once,’ said the landlady, seductively sailing from the room. Much amused at the strange little creature’s ways, Dick glanced around. The room, evidently the landlady’s own, was nicely furnished with chairs and sofa covered in green reps, a canary in a bright brass cage hung in the window between the snowy muslin curtains, a print of the Emperor Napoleon in historically martial attitude scowled from the wall, and on the tables were scattered photographs in plush frames of simpering ladies and gentlemen. In one corner stood a piano, and on the music-stool, with its pages open, lay the score of *Madame Angôt* set to English words. After a few moments the landlady returned, bridling and laughing, and proceeded to escort her visitor upstairs, where, after throwing open the door of the first-floor sitting-room with a dramatic flourish, she at last consented to leave the two men alone.

‘Julian!’ ‘Dick!’ burst simultaneously from their lips as they

shook one another heartily by the hand. 'Who would have thought of finding you here, old fellow?'

'How did you track me out? and how well and—yes, manly you are looking, Dick. Mr. Bruce drew forward a chair, and a faint flush of pleasure rose on his pallid cheek. Julian and Dick were old school-fellows; they had messed, worked, and consorted together. Dick, famous in the cricket and playing fields, was a tyro at his books, and with these Julian was ever ready to help and advise. The two boys parted when they left school; Dick went to Cambridge and Julian to Oxford, and only met occasionally. Dick hunted and boated and spent money; Julian, as before, worked hard, and, owing his education to the savings of a widowed mother, felt no temptation to spend, but preferred honours to sporting notoriety. Thus they drifted apart, their paths in life diverging ever, and for the last two years had completely lost sight of one another, though each still retained an affection for the playmate of his youth. They were a contrast physically as well as morally. Dick was well-knit, large of limb, fair and ruddy; athletics had developed his figure and given him ease and grace of carriage. His bright clear eyes, undimmed by care or work, looked fearlessly out from beneath the broad low forehead, while the curves of his full mobile lips, hidden under the small moustache, and the keen delicate nostrils denoted an emotional and impulsive temperament. Julian's height was above the average; his reedy, lank figure, bowed by study, looked shrunken in the loosely fitting old grey coat he wore; his hands, which in conversation he had a trick of knotting together nervously, were thin and delicate as a woman's; his hair, fair and colourless, thrown back from an exceptionally high white forehead, hung straight and limp; his eyes, of a cool grey tint, had a dim absent expression, the expression of a thinker rather than a man of action; but the delicacy and feminine softness of his appearance was effectually contradicted by the large square chin and well-chiselled expressive mouth. His strength of endurance was great; his capacity for work immense. Dick's power, on the contrary, consisted in passionate energy, though the energy, as a rule, lay dormant and could be called out only by exceptional and serious circumstances.

The young student looked with pleasure at his friend. His life was dull and lonely, but beneath his calm exterior beat a warm and tender heart. Dick, on his part, at sight of him, recalled the happy days of boyhood, when to be captain of the boats meant glory, and in the difficulties of Latin verse con-

sisted life's greatest misery. In those days Dick had unconsciously deferred to Julian, feeling the real superiority of determination and pluck hidden under the shy reserve of the quiet retiring boy. He had lived with other men since, had been flattered and made up to, and influenced, but he had never known what it was to lean implicitly on the stay of true and disinterested friendship since the hour he parted from Julian.

'Why, Julian, old fellow! how is it you've come down to this? Surely *you* are not going in for the horrible drudgery of a boys' tutor?'

'Why not? Is it not the work of a philosopher to be, as Addison says, "every day subduing his passions and laying aside his prejudices"? If prejudices prevent my working for my bread, the sooner I divest myself of them the better.'

'You are the same as ever, I see.'

'Perhaps—not quite though; can we ever stand still?'

'Well, I call it frittering away your faculties to try and teach dull boys. By Jove! I hope for your sake, Julian, they will be brighter at their books than I was.'

'I confess it is the occupation of necessity, not of choice. I am working at a 'magnum opus,' my dear Dick, a work which, I trust, will revolutionize the whole province of history, but like most good and great undertakings it will not pay, and to live (even the student requires some kind of food) I must take what I can find, and learn to be content with little; hence the descent, as you are pleased to consider it, to teaching.'

'Can I help you? It does not seem fair that your abilities should be wasted thus. I have a good allowance myself; and there's granny, I am sure she would let me help you.'

Thanks, Dick. There is no one in the world to whom I would so willingly be indebted as yourself, but I cannot do this. The moment a man accepts aid, he is ruined; his genius is fettered, his work becomes indifferent, and self-reliance, that invaluable quality, leaves him.

'Nonsense, Julian! of some men that might be true, but not of *you* and with *me*.

Julian shook his head.

'I cannot tell, but I dare not test it. I have made two rules for my conduct in life which I am determined not to break: "Be honest with yourself," and "Be under money obligations to no man." Let us talk of something else; what have you been doing?'

'Nothing; I don't wish to do anything,' said Dick sadly; 'I

want to live my life as I like, and hurt nobody, but they won't let one alone to do so, and if one cares for anything it is sure to go wrong. Life is a gigantic mistake.'

'Yes, life *is* a mistake,' answered Julian, a rapt expression coming into his grey eyes; 'and, because it is a tangle, the best of us here below, the strongest and the wisest, set to work to unravel it. The Minotaur's labyrinth is no myth, but it needs a hero to find the clue. What troubles you, Dick? you look honest and unspoiled; you cannot be hampered for money; what is it? tell me.'

'I suppose it's the everlasting story—a woman.'

'Ah!' said Julian, 'then it's serious.'

Characteristically, though this young man had never known any woman intimately, except his mother, a loving simple soul, he believed implicitly in love as an overmastering passion. Dick, with very little persuasion, unburdened himself (he knew the secret fastnesses of his friend's heart), and told of his mad, passionate, hopeless love, which had come and grown and withered like the gourd of Scripture.

'The experience has been sharp,' said Julian, when he had finished, 'but perhaps salutary. You musn't sit down and moan; let it make a man of you. That woman's picture in your heart may keep you always from harm; she is sacred to you now.'

'Yes,' sighed Dick, 'she will not see me again.'

'All honour to her! She has suffered, I have no doubt, suffered doubly from her weakness and apparent treachery. *There's* the sting, Dick, in the treachery; but the struggle is over now, and you are young and have your life before you still.'

At this juncture the irrepressible landlady appeared, bearing the tea-tray, which she placed on the table, much to Julian's annoyance, brushing aside as she did so one of his most cherished manuscripts. 'Shall I pour out the tea?' she asked, pluming herself; 'Pa always said I was the best tea-maker he knew, and exactly understood the proper mixture of green tea. Green is good for the digestion, Mr. Bruce.' 'Thank you, madam, I will pour out the tea myself.' Bruce politely bowed her away, and before the good lady had recovered from her astonishment, she found herself alone in the passage outside. 'Well, I never!' she muttered viciously, '*he* ain't a gentleman, though I do believe his friend was better mannered.' Thereupon she applied her ear to the keyhole, in the hopes of hearing a remark about herself. In this she was disappointed; the two friends had reverted to politics.

‘I should like to see you in Parliament, Dick,’ said Julian, ‘there is your sphere ; not to become a place-hunter, a conscienceless official, or a mere party man, but to take your own line, to be independent, and act in the interests of the people—the people, Dick, who have made England. Let patriotism and courage be your watchwords, words almost forgotten in the strife of contending constituencies, yet words which can be your beacon and your reward. Must you be going?’ he added as Dick rose, ‘Good-bye, I trust we shall meet again soon ; never let a woman break your heart, Dick, not because of her *unworthiness*, but because of the *worthiness* which it must be *your* business to display.’

The two friends then shook hands, Dick wending his way home more cheerfully, and Julian placidly reverting to his books.

CHAPTER III.

COUSINLY AFFECTION.

MAUD waited in vain for her cousin that day. In vain she donned an attire of cerulean blue, supposed to be especially bewitching, and fit to ravish a man’s eyes ; no man came to be ravished and delighted. Maud sat at the window as the afternoon waned, gradually growing crosser and crosser. ‘You had better take off that gown,’ called Mrs. Hardfast from her armchair ; ‘he won’t come now, and that gown is your best, and vastly too good to be crumpled as you are doing.’

‘Oh, mamma, don’t worry, please,’ said the girl pettishly.

‘I should like to know what would happen to you if I did not worry,’ said her mother placidly ; ‘if I had not slaved to make both ends meet, and given all my mind to it, you couldn’t be turned out as you are—fresh dresses, Paris make, fit for a duchess’s daughter. It is a comfort I am accustomed to ingratitude.’

‘I am not ungrateful,’ Maud sighed, ‘but really it is too hot to argue.’

‘I wonder who would have children if one only knew beforehand what trouble and annoyance they entail,’ continued Mrs. Hardfast. ‘Maud, it’s my belief you will never marry Dick. He means nothing, and is only dangling after you because he has not anything better to do.’

Mrs. Hardfast had a peculiarly cutting way of uttering home-truths in a quiet voice, which was extremely galling to the

victim. Maud turned pale and bit her pretty lips with annoyance.

‘I am not at all sure that the report we heard about Dick’s falling in love with Lady Fenchurch was not true. Dick is too much of a gentleman to compromise a woman, but he is deep and sly. Did you notice that he never told us where he had been when he went abroad?’

‘He said he had been to Rome.’

‘Yes, in an off-hand kind of way, but he did not stay there all the time. Where did he spend that time? Men always talk about their doings, unless they have something to hide. They like the sound of their own voices too well to be mute. Dick is hiding something from us, I’m sure.’

‘He is not bound to tell us everything,’ said Maud, revealing a shade more interest in the subject than she had previously showed.

‘Certainly not. But *you* ought to find out everything about his movements, for you spend hours in his company,’ added her mother meaningly.

‘We do not always talk,’ said Maud crossly.

‘What do you do, then? you don’t make love, I know; do you go to sleep? Really, Maud, considering all the pains I have taken to bring you up, and the advantages you have had, you are a perfect fool.’

Maud smiled a little, a bitter sarcastic smile.

‘What visits shall we pay this autumn?’ pursued Mrs. Hardfast reflectively. ‘Let me see, this is the end of September, everyone has returned from the seaside or foreign baths; I’m glad we saved our money and did not go there, for a campaign in country houses is your best chance now; you play tennis splendidly, and your figure can stand those flannel gowns which are so dreadfully unbecoming. You mustn’t get any stouter though, my dear, your bust is quite full enough, and at your age stoutness detracts from a youthful appearance.’

‘My age!’ said Maud.

‘Yes, your age; we needn’t stand on ceremony and pretend fine feelings when we are alone; let me tell you you’re four-and-twenty; getting on, my dear, getting on! Now what invitations have you picked up? Not many, I’m afraid; I hope your sun hasn’t gone down yet; if so, you must marry a parson or a country squire.’

‘Providing of course I fail with Dick; why are you taking it for granted?’

'I won't do that,' said Mrs. Hardfast, looking admiringly at her daughter as she rose and walked across the room. 'You are very graceful and dance to perfection ; but I think we are out of luck. Lady Bobadil has married off her four ugly daughters already.'

'That's different ; she gives parties.'

Maud's ideal was not a high one ; she was accustomed to attribute every action to a shabby motive, and the greater part of her friends' conduct to petty design. She knew no better, poor thing ! Happiness to her meant a good settlement, and a nice person, one who was susceptible to her beauty. She loved her cousin according to her ability, but she would have married any rich man who came within her grasp. Such matter-of-fact minds are not the highest types, but they are very common in society, and if they are not exceptionally tested prove capable of sufficient attachment and ordinary amiability. Maud received her cousin next day with a little pleased air of surprise, and with feline subtlety cross-questioned him as her mother had advised. But Dick was either obtuse or clever ; he parried her attacks skilfully, and she discovered nothing. While they were talking, another visitor was announced. This was the reserve arrow Maud had privately kept to herself in case of failure with her cousin, and perhaps as an additional weapon should Dick prove recalcitrant. Arthur Sterney was an ensign in the Guards, addicted to tight clothes, gaudy ties, high collars, large cigars, late hours, and full-blown women. He admired Maud extremely, but it argued for the desperation of her ambition to have fixed her choice upon him, for, though entitled to a sufficient inheritance at his father's death, he had already disposed of the major part at exorbitant interest to various obliging money-lenders.

'My cousin, Mr. Carrol !' said Maud, with a wave of her hand.

'Oh ! aw ! very happy to make your acquaintance, I'm sure !' he said, after a pause.

'Dick has just returned from abroad,' she explained, to cover the awkward silence.

'Oh ! aw ! Paris, I suppose ? Wish I could get away too ; they will keep me stewing at Aldershot ; 'pon my word we are as hard worked as navvies ; what's the use of being a gentleman if you're to work like a nigger ? Are you in the army, Mr. Carrol ?'

Dick explained that he was a free man, consequently a happy one, and Mr. Sterney forthwith aired his grievances. He told how his maternal great-uncle owned the best moor in Scotland,

and how he had been prevented by the unsympathetic authorities from shooting so much as a brace of grouse. 'It's all the fault of the Radicals ; they won't understand that a gentleman is accustomed to certain things, and can't exist without 'em.'

Dick hereupon smothered a yawn, and Maud deftly turned the conversation into the channel of theatres. Young Sterney was equally at home on this subject.

'Seen little Sally?' he asked accommodatingly ; 'oh ! she's capital ; a Yankee, you know, keeps you in fits of laughter, and dances like a tennis ball—beats the English girls to nothing. I went last night, and I'm going to-morrow. I've taken a stall for the season. You really ought to come, Miss Hardfast, do ! I'll get a box and give you some supper at the Orleans afterwards. The fellows in my regiment are mad about her.'

'Thanks,' said Maud demurely ; 'I will see if we can manage it.'

She had no objection to showing Dick how anxious other young men were for her company, and how desirous to minister to her pleasures. Dick certainly displayed the most complete indifference ; he expressed a friendly interest in the theatrical performance, neither offering his escort nor objecting to that of the young ensign. However, she had her revenge, for when Mr. Sterney had departed, making his exit in as wooden and imperturbable a manner as he had effected his entrance, Dick settled himself more comfortably, and, encouraged by her sympathy, began to unfold to her some of his ideas :

'I met an old school friend yesterday, and he has advised me to get something to do. You see it's a bore, being an idle man——?'

'Yes,' responded Maud, thinking that if he were once married she would give him plenty of occupation in escorting her to balls and parties.

'He advises Parliament. I don't know much about it, but I suppose one can learn ; there are fellows who coach you up for everything, politics and such like.'

'Of course, and you are so clever.'

'I don't think I am clever, but I have some common sense, and I dare say I could get up an interest in anything.'

'Have you any place in view ? How I should like to canvass for you !'

Her cheeks glowed, and her eyes spoke volumes of sympathy.

'I shall write to granny to ask if she has any objection. I must, you know, for the form of the thing, and I mean to go

down there in a day or two to talk over matters ; she has been expecting me some time already.'

'What do you think she will say?'

'Nothing much, but I suppose Uncle Vincent and his wife will make themselves disagreeable ; however, I can generally manage granny. What are your plans ; you are not going to stay on here, are you?'

'Oh, no!' Maud poised her pretty head reflectively, 'We intend to pay a number of country visits : perhaps we shall meet, who knows?'

'I hope we shall,' he said heartily.

Maud had acquired the information she sought. That same afternoon she dashed off a note to Lady Eleanor Highview, whose house, though in the neighbouring county, was not far distant from the abode of Dick's grandmother. Once there, Maud would manage the remainder, contrive to see him by hook or by crook, deepen the impression she had made upon him, increase her influence, finally carry him off captive. Politics were a nice safety-valve, and anything was better for her purpose than the society of other women.

Maud then proceeded to her dressmaker's, where she ordered one or two pretty walking-dresses and some new hats, promising to send a cheque shortly for the amount of last year's account—had she not incurred fresh expense, she would long since have been pressed for it—and calmly sat down to await the answer to her letter. It came in a few days. Lady Eleanor said she would be delighted to see Maud and her mother, and thought it kind of them to have taken her at her word, and interpreted the general invitation given in the season into a special one. No doubt some young people would be staying with her, and Maud must prepare herself for tennis and balls. Maud's eyes sparkled as she read the cordial letter.

'There, mamma ! you see I was not mistaken ; my sun has not yet gone down yet, for Lady Eleanor never invites people who are not good-looking, agreeable, or useful. I am not useful, for I have no money and no interest, consequently I must be good-looking.'

Mrs. Hardfast smiled, and immediately proceeded to discharge her cook, and to screw the housemaid down to the lowest possible figure of board wages, on the plea that, with rents unpaid and Christmas presents in prospect, she could not afford more. Mrs. Hardfast's Christmas presents to her servants consisted of an old gown which could be of no possible use to her, and of the winter number of some goody picture-paper.

The housemaid was a new arrival, however, and, imagining the Christmas presents to mean a crisp bank-note, consented, after a little demur, to the board wages proposed.

‘And now, Maud,’ cried Mrs. Hardfast, having settled these agreeable preliminaries, ‘I am ready to start whenever you like.’

CHAPTER IV.

THE FAMILY LAWYER.

It was about this time, that one evening Sir Hilary Fenchurch imparted a piece of news to his wife and sister. Returning from the county town he met the family lawyer, Mr. Dewsnap, who received it straight from Mr. Marall the member’s own lips that he had decided to retire from Parliament, and agreed to ask Sir Hilary to be his substitute in the event of a vacancy for the county, in which case there might possibly be a contest. Hitherto a quiet and undisputed Tory seat, some dashing young Liberal might take it into his head to come down and make a forlorn trial to regain it.

‘They wish you to stand?’ said Miss Fenchurch.

‘Yes.’

Sir Hilary hesitated a little.

‘Dewsnap thinks I have a very good chance.’

‘Oh! Hilary, pray accept and take your rightful position.’

‘To be sure, Mr. Marall’s property was never as large as mine, and my farms are all in first-rate condition, while his, I am told, are shockingly out of repair, and there is not a good gate on his estate; but then times are changed, and what did very well twenty years ago won’t do now, and then, with the ballot and the impossibility of bribing, it is hard to say who has a chance.’

‘I have heard that the ballot is really a gain to the Conservative party,’ put in Evelyn.

‘Nonsense! the only use of the ballot is to help those who haven’t the courage of their opinions. Really, now I think of it, I do believe I’m fairly popular; hunting-men generally agree with the farmers, they’re glad of the chance of getting compensation for the chickens, and finding a market for their young horses. I’ll ride over to West Thorpe tomorrow and consult Dewsnap. There’s one thing to be said: if I do stand, the people will have a real good staunch Conservative to represent them, and a man who will exert himself in the cause of his party. That poor Marall was gouty, and

couldn't speak ; he let everything go by default ; I shan't do that. There's education now, those infernal Board Schools, that cost something shameful ! I've no patience with the way they cocker up the children of the poor, giving them all kinds of ridiculous learning ; much better give them boots ; the proper education of a labouring man is, in the words of the Catechism, to "learn to labour truly, and to do his duty in that state of life to which it has pleased God to call him." Every man wishes to change his state of life ; which must lead to discontent and unsettle the mind.'

'Indeed, you're right, Hilary ; it is quite impossible to get a good servant now,' said Miss Fenchurch peevishly. 'That housemaid of yours, Evelyn, with the fringe of fair hair, looks more like an actress than a decent respectable servant. I caught her in the passage the other day, reading a novel, which she hid away when she saw me, with an insolent giggle.'

'True,' said Sir Hilary, 'it is deplorable ;' then turning to his wife, he said, 'You must canvass for me, Evelyn, and on such an occasion we had better waive all fear of infectious diseases and visit the cottages together.'

'Be sure to put some camphor in your dress,' said Miss Fenchurch warningly.

'I shall be glad to help you.' Lady Fenchurch's voice rang so gaily that her sister-in-law stared at her in amazement. 'And you will persuade the Government to improve the poor people's houses, won't you ? and I will bribe the electors with pretty speeches.'

Sir Hilary did not answer ; it was hardly so much with the idea of improving the condition of the helpless, as of increasing his own popularity and influence, that he decided to come forward as a candidate for Parliamentary honours. Such motives are unfortunately extremely common in the political world, and nobody thinks the worse of a man in consequence.

On the following morning Sir Hilary mounted his grey cob, and rode along the autumnal tinted lanes to West Thorpe. He had lighted a cigar and was thinking deeply. Actuated by a keen sense of propriety in contradiction to eccentricity, and knowing that certain things were expected of him, he determined that society should not be disappointed. Sir Hilary belonged to the old school of Tories, who cherish the comfortable conviction that Britons never will be slaves, and that the Englishman is the finest fellow in the world. He considered the duties of an M.P. to be comprised in voting steadily with his party, presiding at agricultural dinners, and giving away

prizes to Volunteers. Needless to say he was oppressed by no deep sense of moral responsibility ; consequently his meditations were caused solely by the problem of the cost of elections. For Sir Hilary, though tolerably open-handed, was, like all good men of business, averse to spending money uselessly. He ran over in his mind the chances of a rival candidate, with the speculation as to who that rival might be. West Thorpe, though a market and county town, was a sleepy place. Trade had dwindled, and the progress made was in a retrograde direction. The town itself consisted of a number of narrow twisting streets converging on the market-place, and running away into various intricate offshoots of small courts and alleys. The variety of size and shape of the houses, which were some square and red brick, some white with gabled windows and starred with black beams, some big, some little, some thatched, some slated, clustering up and down from the river-side to the elevation of the market-place, rendered the town a very picturesque object. Artists came to paint and photographers to photograph it, while the church itself, an ancient building whose spire was nearly on a level with the market-place, formed the legitimate pride of the inhabitants. Yet, as it was gradually falling into ruin, and the restoration begun in the last few years had never been completed, owing to the want of funds and the lack of any great local magnate to cherish the undertaking, it seemed probable that decay would soon overtake and smother the restorations. The church remained in the position of a beauty with a patch over one eye, or of a picture by some great artist upon which a mischievous school-boy has daubed a splash of whitewash.

As you entered the main street there stood facing you a massive square red-brick house with a large brass knocker and a porch overshadowed by a handsome magnolia tree. This was the lawyer's house, and here Sir Hilary stopped, rang the bell loudly, and asked for Mr. Dewsnap, leaving his pony in the care of the page-boy, who owned an immense admiration for the sleek and well-fed animal, and showed it obligingly by tickling him under his stomach to see if he would kick, and poking him in the ribs as a proof of familiar affection. When on the return journey the cob snorted and jumped about, his unconscious owner merely attributed this to high spirits and to a lack of patience common to both women and horses. Mr. Dewsnap was elderly, and had a thick head of iron-grey hair ; his little light eyes were sharp and shrewd ; his lips thin and firmly compressed, though a sarcastic smile occasionally played

about them when in company of his clients, which caused the latter to feel uncomfortable and to fear rather than love him. He had studied the worst side of nature in his profession, and invariably looked to self-interest as the motive of conduct, and mistrusted all those who talked of principles and honour; yet in ordinary life he was a kind-hearted man, a good husband and a good father, and his word could be implicitly relied upon, so that he grew to be regarded as an oracle of cleverness and wisdom. Sir Hilary esteemed him highly. Sentiment in matters of business he considered out of place, and, when the lawyer had once ventured to remark to him on the folly of an old man taking a young wife, Sir Hilary had been mortally offended. It was some months before he forgave him; but now, in a moment of difficulty and excitement, he instinctively turned to him for advice. Mr. Dewsnap settled his spectacles carefully on his nose as Sir Hilary entered, and prepared to greet his client. The spectacles were unnecessary, for Mr. Dewsnap's eyesight was excellent, but they served him as a shield and an excuse when dealing with difficult or slippery people. Sir Hilary dropped at once into the large leather armchair that stood with its face towards the light and began:

'Well, Dewsnap, I've made up my mind to stand.'

'A very wise resolution, I'm sure, Sir Hilary, and the county ought to return you if it looked to its own interests; but I hear there is to be a contest; the Liberals mean to bring forward a candidate.'

'I don't see who is to come forward,' said Sir Hilary, perplexed; 'old Marall has no relations, Lord Dilbury is abroad; I can't think of any one.'

'You've forgotten one important person.'

'Who is that? There is none but Highview; he would not care for it.'

'Perhaps not, but you've been in love though, Sir Hilary, and you're a married man; have you never found yourself doing something you had not intended at your wife's instigation?'

'Never!'

'Then you're exceptionally fortunate; in my profession I constantly see the most independent men the most influenced by their families. Lady Eleanor is a very remarkable person; I have had several proofs of it. I can fancy that she might wish her husband to be an M.P., or rather that she wishes to return an M.P.—either her husband or another.'

'To whom do you refer?'

‘To Mr. Dick Carrol. She has decided upon him, I believe; he’s young and good-looking, and would make an easy puppet in her hands.’

‘What! you mean Mrs. Carrol’s grandson?’

‘Yes, her heir. She can’t live very long; she is an old lady, and then the fine place of Long Leam will be his.’

‘But she is not exactly one of the county people.’

‘No, but she owns some property here; her grandson would have a good chance.’

‘It will be a fight, Dewsnap?’

‘Yes, it will be a fight: you are not alarmed?’

‘No, oh dear, no! I’ll fight to the last, though it will be expensive. I’ve no idea of a stuck-up young jackanapes from a neighbouring county ousting me from my proper position. I’ll spare neither trouble nor expense to beat him.’

‘It will depend greatly on the ladies. Lady Eleanor *versus* Lady Fenchurch. The former is a seasoned old soldier, but the latter has youth and beauty on her side. It is still possible to bribe with kind looks and pretty words, Sir Hilary; and if we do win, why, it will be all the greater triumph.’

‘How much will it cost?’ said Sir Hilary, after a pause; ‘not that money is any object—none whatever. I have been a thrifty man all my life, and I have savings.’

‘It may be a matter of five or six thousand. You must get Camps as your agent; he is the best; he is up to all the dodges, and will keep you strictly within the law. See him to-day if you can, and lose no time about it; he is in the town at this moment, I happen to know.’

‘Very well, I’ll try to find him at once.’ Sir Hilary buttoned his coat. ‘Give me a glass of your old Madeira first, and I’ll be off.’

Mr. Dewsnap supplied the Madeira and watched Sir Hilary ride down the street.

‘He looks gloomy—I should say a man with whom marriage hasn’t agreed particularly,’ thought the shrewd lawyer to himself, as he replaced the wine in the cupboard.

CHAPTER V

MAUD ANTICIPATES.

WE left Dick meditating on the advantages to be derived from a Parliamentary career, and somewhat inclined to adopt it. He possessed a certain amount of talent, which, however, had

hitherto lain dormant, but, thanks to Julian's advice, it seemed probable that he might yet cut a figure. The abrupt termination of his love affair in some measure assisted this, for he was sore and angry at heart, and ready to plunge into any form of excitement that presented itself. A few days later he was to be found again in Julian's little parlour, drinking in his friend's wisdom, and resting himself in the calm and rational atmosphere of study. Mrs. Flinks, on her part, who appreciated the unworldliness of her lodger, even while she felt inclined to despise him for it, viewed Dick's coming with much interest. Julian's extreme imperviousness to her coquettish ways exasperated her occasionally, and the fact that she might be wearing her most becoming mob-cap, or her best-fitting gown, without even causing him to lift his head from the big folio in which he was immersed, would have tried a saint's patience. But then, in return, he was so quiet, so unassuming, so uncomplaining, that if his fire were let out, or the hot water proved to be tepid, or the sugar unexpectedly exhausted, it was all the same to him, he never murmured. In fact, he was so remarkably childish and unsophisticated, in subtle Mrs. Flinks's opinion, that she put him down as somewhat weak in mind. That was certainly not the case with the nice bright-looking young gentleman, his friend. There was nothing weak about *him*. The two men were in Julian's little untidy room, littered with books and papers; Dick seated in the only armchair, Julian himself at the table, jotting down notes on a bit of paper.

'In another year or two,' he was saying, 'I shall have finished my History—the history of the social development of England: it is a kind of history we want now, not a dry abstract of wars and intrigues, but the story of the life of the people, the record of their faith, their language, their social habits.' Julian sighed a little; his mild eyes bore a wearied expression.

'You're tired, old fellow,' said Dick, taking the cigar out of his mouth. Julian contented himself with a clay pipe, but his friend had more fastidious tastes. 'Why do you work yourself to death like this? what's the use of it? If *you* don't find out all these things, some other fellow will—an empty place is filled up directly.'

'Don't say that, Dick.' Julian's tone was pained. 'That's the fiendish voice that haunts me sometimes when I'm alone and weary, and whispers to me that there is nothing worth, nothing true, nothing right; that I've slaved and toiled for nothing, and that there is no reward—none. That we must just grope and wonder, and—die. But it isn't true, I tell you

it isn't ; work is its own reward, and good work is the divine seed sown by feeble human hands.'

'Probably ; but you're morbid, Julian. Come away to the country with me, to the green fields, and the tennis, and the birds, and the garden.' He hesitated, not being used to sentimental descriptions. 'You'd enjoy it—take a holiday.'

'There is no good work to be done in spurts ; I must persevere. I am putting the very best of myself into this book ; and if afterwards I break down—well, when a man has done his duty he must not count the cost.'

'Ridiculous creature ! Why not be practical and help me ? I'm one of the people ! take an interest in my social development. You talked to me about political life the last time I was here ; well, since then I've been offered a seat in Parliament.'

'Indeed, tell me about it.'

'A distant sort of connection of mine, a Mr. Highview, has written to propose I should stand for the county ; the old member is about to retire, and they think the seat can be won by a Liberal.'

'Of course—a Liberal—a social reformer, Dick.'

'I'd better reform *myself* first, I think. I don't know or care a fig about reforms.'

'That will come,' said Julian confidently.

'There will be a contest ; I shall rather like that—the excitement will be as good as a campaign—ah, why didn't granny let me be a soldier ? I'm fond of fighting, and my opponent will be some respectable old Tory nonentity, I suppose—Mr. Highview does not state who it is—but he seems pretty confident of my success.'

'Of course, it depends upon your adversary—the agricultural interest is usually shortsighted and conservative—if your rival is a large landed proprietor, you do not stand so good a chance.'

'Mr. Highview thinks well of it, and so does Lady Eleanor, which is even more to the point ; she rules him, you know, and whatever she undertakes I am confident she will succeed in.'

'That is right, then ; I have nothing to add but to wish you well, Dick. Try to do yourself justice. A man has no business to sit down with hands folded, or plant cabbages, till he has earned the right to do so ; there is heroism even in giving the right vote according to your conviction.'

'I don't feel like a hero,' said Dick, stretching himself lazily ;

‘I haven’t a particle of ambition, and I don’t care sufficiently about anything to make myself uncomfortable, certainly not for any abstract idea.’

‘You may in time, perhaps.’

‘There is another reason,’ Dick hesitated, ‘why I’m not sure if I ought to accept—you see, the lady I told you about lives in the county—I might be thrown into her society; I don’t want to behave ill to her or to get into a bother.’

‘Have you any reason to believe that her husband will take any active part in the election?’

‘None whatever. Mr. Highview does not mention him. He said no Tory candidate had been decided upon, and he is anxious for an early answer in order that I may be first in the field.’

‘Then decide to accept. You need not court the lady’s society, and remember that your public duty is the engrossing one. When the first pang of hearing your name mentioned is over, she will learn to get accustomed to it. Besides, possibly you exaggerate her feelings; she is married—why should she not love her husband?’

‘It was a *mariage de convenance*.’

‘Even so—you must not give way to morbid feelings; all is over between you two now; do not let yourself dream of possibilities. Shape your future without a thought of her—the only way to overcome weakness is to look a thing straight in the face without flinching—and grapple with your difficulties bravely. You forgive me for speaking out?’

‘Certainly. I know, old fellow, no man could have a truer or a kinder friend than you, only, you see, I’m not a bit of a hero. If I accept this offer I shall make one condition, that you come down with me and help in my campaign.’

‘Much as I regret leaving my books,’ said Julian warmly, ‘in this case I cannot hesitate; you may command my services whenever you like.’

Dick left his friend’s lodgings that day in a more contented frame of mind. Fate had decided for him; he had nothing to do now but to float on the stream, and the sense of a resolution taken seemed to lift a cloud of difficulty from his mind; yet he was still too much engrossed even to regard Mrs. Flinks’s eager invitation to step into her parlour as he went out. The little woman watched him leave the house with mingled anger and disappointment, then flounced downstairs to her kitchen, where the elderly maid-of-all-work stood with bare red arms, washing up her dishes.

‘He’s gone again, Eves, without so much as a word, and I in my new cherry ribbons. It’s my belief that that pale, mean-spirited Cripps, who gets his bread by scribbling, and hasn’t a thought beyond steel pens and watery ink, put him up to slighting me. If my dear pa were still alive, wouldn’t he just give him a bit of his mind.’

‘Lor’ bless you, mum,’ answered Eves, without turning her head, ‘if I was you I’d give up hankering after fine gentlemen that ain’t worth the butcher’s meat they consume, and take a honest tradesman who could live in a villa, and keep a gig to save yer feet getting wet o’ Sundays.’

Mrs. Flinks, accustomed to the old woman’s homely advice, shrugged her shoulders, and threw herself pettishly into a chair.

Eves, still at her washing, continued :

‘And then, when ye’re married, there comes a heap of children to worrit yer. Who would be so anxious to have a family, I wonder? Children, when they’re young, are a armful ; but when they’re bigger they’re a heartful, and, my sakes, that’s just worse.’

Dick, unconscious of the storm brewing behind him, pursued his way quietly to the Hardfasts’ house. Maud was at home, looking very handsome, in dark blue cashmere. She had a useful knack of being always in the fashion, and yet never appearing overdressed or eccentric.

‘I am so glad you came,’ she said sweetly. ‘Mamma is out, and, as in her absence I can never receive visitors, except you (you, of course, are a relation), I should have felt very dull all the afternoon.’

‘Then you only care for somebody to call ; you are not particular as to who it is?’

‘Dick ! don’t be an idiot. I’m *always* pleased to see you, only I don’t always say so ; it might seem like flattery.’

‘I’m glad of that,’ said Dick, edging his chair a little nearer, ‘for I want to consult you about a *very* important matter, on which I wish your advice.’

Maud’s heart gave a flutter—could the momentous words be spoken now, what an amount of worry and trouble would be saved, and everything satisfactorily arranged.

‘We’ve always been good friends, Maud, haven’t we?’

‘Always,’ she answered sweetly.

‘Ever since the days we stole cherries off the garden-wall, and hid under the water-butt to escape the gardener—and I have always had such an opinion of your cleverness that now I

am going to take a very important step, I cannot do so unless you give it your sanction.'

Maud listened impatiently, a rosy flush mantling her cheek. It seemed quite unnecessary to make all these preliminary speeches. What cared she about childhood and cherries, sorry reminders of long years of backboards and dreary lesson-learning? It need not prove so very difficult to ask a girl to be your wife, and seal the bargain with a kiss. How provoking, to be sure, to be a woman, and have to sit still and look unconscious, and not dare to help out the stammered and bungling confession, but on the contrary pretend to a pleased surprise and agitation, emotions which she could only feel on the score of her mother's premature return before the irrevocable words had been spoken!

'Do you know Mr. Highview?' asked Dick.

Maud stared.

'Of course I do!'

What in the world had this beginning to do with the proposal Dick was about to make? She supposed it must be attributed to nervousness and a habit of procrastination, and she rather snappishly continued:

'He was poor dear papa's friend.'

'Ah! I had forgotten.'

Dick paused again, and Maud began to beat the carpet with her shoe; she could not help it, these wanderings from the beaten path of love seemed so very unnecessary.

'He has asked me to stand for the county, and do the canvassing from his place, which is more convenient than granny's for the purpose. I am rather tempted. An election must be exciting—almost as good as fox-hunting. Of course I'm not clever, and I don't much care about it; but I think I should cut a very tolerable figure, don't you, Maud?'

Maud was occupied dissembling her rage. To have her expectations raised, her feelings so cruelly trampled upon, was too bad. Dick was perfectly brutal—heartless. She made a superhuman effort, however; the happy moment might only be deferred, not lost for ever. 'Yes, dear Dick, you know I think you *very* clever; it will be an excellent thing, and as you say quite an excitement; besides, perhaps I can help you a tiny bit, for *we* are going to stay with the Highviews too; how fortunate, isn't it, and how I shall hail all your achievements, and listen greedily to your first speech! I shall make mamma often take me to the House of Commons, and try to secure a front place in the ladies' gallery, among all the old women who

suck peppermint lozenges, and discuss the merits of the speakers during the debates.'

'Would you indeed do this?' cried Dick, seizing her hand, 'what a good woman you are to be sure, Maud! I never half appreciated you till this moment—you really approve and you really advise me to try? It wouldn't do for a fellow to fail, you know, if he did try, and make an ass of himself. I was half afraid you would discourage me and——'

'And why, pray?' she inquired, looking up at him languidly through her expressive, half-closed eyes; 'whatever promotes your happiness gives *me* happiness too——'

Here was an opening for a man whose heart was given to the pretty girl sitting beside him, and glowing with gentle interest and devoted sympathy. But Dick's mind was not running on love; he only cared for Maud's approval, because, like the rest of us, he preferred his decision to be strengthened by the approval of his friends. He certainly thought it a little remarkable that a young and good-looking girl should show such interest in politics; but in these days of female education and advanced views on all subjects one need be surprised at nothing.

'I'll write to Highview to-night,' he said quietly, 'and accept. He will want me to go down there at once, I expect. Granny will have to wait again—poor old dear! She won't mind—she's used to it.'

'We shall be at Highview Castle together, I hope,' said Maud; 'it is such a nice place, and Lady Eleanor is so kind—but you mustn't fall in love with Luce.'

'Who is Luce? and why should I fall in love with her?' asked Dick absently.

'She is Lady Eleanor's niece, and of course they will try to make up a match between you—she is a nice girl, but, unfortunately, very plain.'

'Plain—is she?'

'Yes, thin and pale, and has dark colourless hair.' Maud put her hand up innocently to her own glossy auburn locks.

'Plain or not, I shall have other things to think of, and I scarcely imagine Miss Luce will need to complain of my attentions.'

'Don't you intend to speak to us poor ladies, then, while you're in the house?' asked Maud, with a becoming pout of her full red lips.

'Oh, *you*, that's different.' Maud was triumphant and consoled; the *you*, so decidedly accentuated, sounded sweet in her ears; he regarded her, then, as something apart and more precious than ordinary girls. After a little further desultory

talk, a few more bewitching upward glances from Maud, a lingering pressure of his hand, and many hearty congratulations and good wishes, Dick departed. He was satisfied and reassured; no man is impervious to cleverly conveyed flattery and pleasant looks and allusions, unless he has reached middle age, and is very crabbed and very sourly inclined indeed. He wrote a gratified and nicely worded acceptance of Mr. Highview's proposal, and expressed himself as much pleased and honoured by the offer that had been made him—an offer for which he knew himself to be indebted to Mr. Highview's kind support. Lady Eleanor smiled and nodded her head approvingly when her husband handed her the letter at breakfast, saying, 'Well, my dear, what do you think of that?'

'Think! why I never expected anything else; all young men are ambitious and easily flattered, unless they're fools, and from all I hear Dick Carrol is *not* a fool.'

CHAPTER VI.

LUCE WINDERMERE.

THE Highviews and the Fenchurchs were the two great rival houses in the county, for Lord Dilbury, who was a hypochondriacal old bachelor, lived abroad and had almost ceased to be regarded as an Englishman. He received his rents punctually enough through an agent's hands, but he never did anything for his tenants, nor took any part in county business or politics, and in fact to most people was only a name, and a very disagreeable name too, on the occasions when the hounds ran through his fine woods, and the huntsmen were suddenly pulled up by locked gates and high iron railings. Mr. Marall, the late member, was a fox-hunting squire, illiterate, crusty, and devoted to sport. He neither knew nor cared how to make and keep his position; thus, while Sir Hilary Fenchurch remained unmarried, Lady Eleanor reigned alone as the great lady of the county. Now, however, with a new and pretty rival both in politics and society, circumstances were considerably altered, and the contest seemed likely to be a trial of moral strength on the part of the ladies, quite as much as a battle of wily popularity on the part of the men, and the general result appeared very doubtful. Sir Hilary was popular with the farmers; he was a good landlord, quiet, but improving, and encouraged the breed of horses; but he was pig-headed and narrow-minded.

Mr. Highview, on the contrary, was the friend of the artisans and manufacturers, inclined to be broad and tolerant, and, so long as a man's political opinions were honestly of the right pattern, cared little for his religious views. Lady Eleanor was *not* liked, though much feared and courted. A long tongue in the upper classes is as great a power as in the ranks of washerwomen. Lady Eleanor had a command of language and a choice of admirable maxims which, as a rule, left her opponents but little to answer. Yet, while a great many people distinctly hated, and a few sought her from motives of real affection, the majority distrusted her. It was felt that, whichever way her own interests inclined, in that direction her conduct would tend, and that consequently no positively consistent behaviour on her part could be looked for. She was handsome, clever, and when she pleased indubitably fascinating, so fascinating that once in her presence you could not help believing in her. Mr. Highview himself, who had been fascinated in his early youth, believed in her still. He would bow to her whims and caprices, and defend them with a tender care that was peculiarly touching, and drew forth sundry shrugs and compressions of lips from impartial friends.

French writers assert that love is only kept alive by continual stimulation of surprises and variety. Possibly this may have accounted for Lady Eleanor's empire over her husband, for none could predicate with ease in which direction her newest eccentricity might travel. Uncontradicted and undaunted, she had sailed gaily down the stream of life until at fifty years of age she was still buxom and fair, and owned a pair of white and dazzling shoulders, which she was fond of displaying in the lowest of well-cut gowns. Her face was unruffled, remarkable in its freshness and absence of crows'-feet, yet her favourite figure of speech was to the effect that 'her health must soon break down under the strain of constant worry and labour imposed upon her.' Just now her hobby was politics, and she certainly did give herself a great deal of trouble in the matter, but the trouble was self-sought and therefore scarcely worthy of commiseration.

But even Lady Eleanor was not perfectly happy; she had one skeleton in her cupboard, and to her it seemed the bitterest conceivable. She had no children. Mr. Highview's niece, Luce Windermere, lived with them as an adopted daughter at his earnest request, for she was the only child of his dead sister, and dear to him accordingly. This was another trial to poor Lady Eleanor, who had all the trouble and

responsibility of a school-room without the pleasures of motherhood.

Lady Eleanor was strict, anxious, and kind in her way, but poor Luce's childhood was brightened by no maternal love. She enjoyed neither kisses, caresses, nor affectionate words; she never felt the touch of a fondly stroking hand with its witchery of subtle speechless sympathy, never saw eyes fill with tears, or heard a tremble come into the voice, or saw a shade of mysterious sorrow pass over an anxious face, and pressed the lips put warm and close to hers in an evening benediction. If she knew the meaning of love it was in connection with her uncle. To him she brought her babyish tattle, the hundred pretty exacting ways of childhood, and, much as she shrank from her aunt's cold words, so much the more did she coil round her uncle the clinging tendrils of her loving heart. Luce was said to be plain, and certainly by the side of her handsome aunt she did look plain. The girl felt this want of beauty as a shortcoming, and mixed up with it a remorseful feeling that it was ingratitude on her part that prevented her from responding more fully to Lady Eleanor's efforts on her behalf. Sad were the looks the poor child frequently threw in the mirror as she tried to accustom herself to her plainness, and wondered why nature, so bountiful to the aunt, had been so niggard to the niece. Perhaps the contrast made her seem even plainer than she really was, for she had a slim and graceful figure, and a pair of beautiful eyes enlivened her small pale face. Even Lady Eleanor confessed that Luce had beautiful eyes, large and soft and pleading, but then, as Lady Eleanor said, what was the use of them, when they were generally cast down, and veiled by the long dark lashes, only flashing and lightening when Luce was keen and interested, which in her aunt's presence occurred but seldom. They were such truthful eyes too, eyes full of transparent honesty and singleness, indeed their full glance thrown questioningly upon Lady Eleanor in some of her erratic moods proved disturbing to the proud lady's equanimity. For eyes *can* speak, and sometimes with a weight of directness and censure that words do not possess. As you looked, that is to say as an impartial observer looked, into Luce's eyes and caught the deep spiritual expression that lay in them, you forgot that her nose was too square, her mouth too large, her hair absolutely refusing to be crimped and twisted into any fashionable shape, brown and dull, too light to be rich in colour, too dark to be golden, that her manner was shy and constrained, her hands tiny and waxen, and her slim figure

marred by a distinct and regrettable stoop. Luce was accustomed to say that it did not matter what she wore or how she looked, for nobody ever threw a glance at her when in company of her queen-like aunt, and that, instead of being named Light, she should have been christened Shadow, her principal mission being to serve as a foil to the radiancy of beauty beside her. Lady Eleanor's object just now—for she always *had* an object—was to marry Luce to Dick, having fixed upon him as an eligible *parti*, and a person whom she was likely to be able to retain as her nominee and dependant. She had not imparted these views to Mr. Highview, but merely informed him that Mr. Carrol was a promising young man, who would do honour to the Liberal cause if he were once instructed in the right path.

Dick's civil little note had been duly received and Luce informed of his coming, which nowise interested her. She was standing at this moment, as was her frequent habit, by the window dreaming. Her large sad eyes were fixed on the autumnal landscape, on the ruddy beech, and the yellow chestnut-trees, and the dark Scotch firs standing up straight against the cold grey sky; here and there a lime-tree, already stripped of its leaves, showed only the bare and slender twigs and branches. Occasionally a golden leaf fluttered down and added itself to the damp and decaying heap which the gardener indefatigably and hopelessly swept together. It was a dreary day, a depressing day, and Luce, whose nature was essentially receptive and sensitive, felt it so. Just then her aunt's full cheerful voice disturbed her reverie.

'Ah! I thought I should find you here, Luce, dawdling about and doing nothing, as usual. Why don't you go for a constitutional at least, like other girls, and get a bit of colour into your cheeks? you will never be anything but sallow at this rate.'

Luce coloured painfully; it hurt her to be always reminded of bodily infirmities, the possession of which she remembered acutely.

'Did you want anything, aunt?' she faltered.

'Want anything! Did anyone ever see such a creature? she thinks no one has anything to do but to stare blankly out of window all day long, as she does herself! Have you forgotten that we shall have a houseful next week? and the Hardfasts and Mr. Carrol come to-day; and of course the housekeeper has chosen this opportunity to fall ill, and one of the best carriage-horses is lame, and your uncle, as usual, is perfectly

placid, so that everything falls upon me, and I'm really not strong.'

'Can I do anything to help you?'

'I am sure I don't know what you *can* do; you generally make a muddle of everything you touch. The last time you wrote the invitations you put the Countess of Ditchwater, forgetting that her husband is only a baron, and you presented my compliments to General Truro's wife, who was a housemaid before he married her, and whom I certainly never meant to ask. I often say to myself what is to become of you some day, when I am dead and gone, if you should ever have a house of your own to look after?—not that that's likely.'

'No, it isn't likely,' said Luce calmly; 'then why should we talk about it? I never mean to marry, and when you don't want to keep me you can send me away; I shall not complain.'

'Send you away, indeed, child! That is just like the Highviews, isn't it?—why they have always been generous to a fault. I wonder what your uncle would say to such a speech.'

'He would not like it, I am sure; but indeed, aunt, if I am so troublesome why do you keep me here?'

'Stuff, child!' said Lady Eleanor pettishly, looking severely at Luce, who stood meekly, with hands folded before her. 'I wish you wouldn't stoop so dreadfully; I declare your figure is shocking! Can't you hold up your head as I do?'

Poor Luce's head drooped lower and lower, and two big tears gathered in her eyes.

'Crying! I declare you are a regular baby; nothing spoils the complexion like tears. Don't let your uncle see you with red eyes, for goodness' sake, or he will think I have been tormenting you, and that you are miserable instead of being, as you really are, a spoilt useless girl. You needn't look like a martyr either when I speak to you for your good, as is my duty. And pray try to be civil to Mr. Carrol when he comes; I am told he is a charming young man, and, of course, at his grandmother's death he'll be immensely rich. If you lay yourself out to be agreeable, I don't really see why, after all, you may not have a house of your own, some day. He will take you in to dinner to-night, so do your best.'

Luce coloured painfully. Such speeches were an utter desecration of marriage in her opinion, for she inclined to the idea that only similarity of tastes and mutual love, of which, alas! she was so ignorant, could give peace or sanctity to the union of the sexes.

Lady Eleanor, satisfied with her peroration, now rose and majestically left the room.

Luce felt more wretched and depressed than ever. She knew she was plain, she had already accepted the fact; yet surely beauty was not everything; might it not be possible to possess qualities as valuable and virtues to compensate? An intuition of something higher swept her soul. To hear of heroism and goodness fired her with enthusiasm; to read fine poetry roused her; to listen to sweet music entranced her; the sight of nature soothed her. Why had she these capacities, these sensibilities, but to unfold and use them? Life could not be the poor mean thing her aunt suggested, or the sense of its emptiness would crush her at once. No! no! her truth and earnestness found a response in nature. It could not be; there was nothing useless in the universe.

She took down her hat and cloak from the peg where they hung, and went out carrying a basket on her arm. The autumnal wind caressed her boisterously, and painted her sallow cheeks a faint rose, so that she looked almost pretty as in the approach she met the fly containing Mrs. Hardfast and Maud, their maid, and a pile of luggage. Maud spied her at once, and jumped out to give her a hearty welcome, while Mrs. Hardfast called after her daughter:

‘It is very damp and raw, Maud; do take care, or you will catch cold and have a red nose at dinner.’

‘No! no!’ cried Maud, bent on having her own way, and confident in the magnificence of her young strength and beauty to defy a blustering autumn day. ‘Never mind me; you drive on and get a rest before dinner; a walk will do me good.’ Then she twined her arm in that of Luce and asked her innumerable questions.

‘Where are you going to, like an old market-woman with that basket on your arm?’

‘To visit some poor people. I have port wine and soup in the basket.’

‘Oh! I never visit poor people. I should hate to do so,’ said Maud, daintily tripping over the wet places in the road.

‘I don’t like it much either; but it’s something to do, an object for a walk, and, besides, I really believe it gives them pleasure.’

‘You might find something else to occupy your time, I should think—something pleasanter. I always design a new dress whenever time hangs heavily on my hands.’

'Dress bores me; my aunt thinks so much of it; I believe she fancies people are only pegs to hang clothes on.'

Maud laughed and shook the golden fringe out of her eyes.

'It is very jolly being here, Luce; don't look so doleful. I mean to enjoy myself. I've got a great many plans in my head, and you must help me with some of them. I can assure you I have a very busy time before me, and you are such an unworldly little creature that you can't stand in my way. Do you know Mr. Carrol?'

'No,' said Luce indifferently.

'Oh! Well, I intend to marry him.'

Luce looked at her a little surprised, and said quietly:

'My aunt wants *me* to marry him too; but he's sure not to look at me, that's one comfort!'

Maud glanced eagerly at her friend to see if she were in earnest. Such supernatural indifference to her prospects surpassed her imagination; but if Luce spoke truth, and Maud really believed she did, Luce, at least, was a valuable and reliable ally.

'Then you will help me?—what a funny girl you are to be sure, Luce!'

'You wouldn't think it funny if you lived my life—it isn't pleasant to be overlooked by every man you meet and reproached for it afterwards. I wish I could go out as a governess.'

'Nonsense! you are a fool, Luce. I should be glad enough if I had a rich uncle who would let me live with him. *You* don't know what it is to have to make both ends meet. Mamma works at the problem all the year round, and it's the most difficult sum in creation; just as you think you have got to the end of it, you find a slight omission or mistake in your calculations, and you have to begin all over again. I mean to marry naturally; but, rich or not rich, every girl is a fool who does not, when she gets a chance. I've never had a *real* good offer though yet, and of course one can't make a bad bargain.'

'I should never better myself,' said Luce hopelessly; 'I'm plain, and I can't marry for money, and no one will ever care for me, just for myself; it is no use, Maud, thinking of it. If I married for money, I should simply loathe the man, and kill him, or myself, before the honeymoon was over.'

'Fudge!' said Maud, sharply. 'Providence helps those that help themselves; if you cast your eyes down and look glum whenever a man approaches you, of course you can't

expect him to find you bewitching. I always smile and appear delighted with every one, no matter how stupid he may be, and then I try to find out as quickly as I can what is his particular weakness and trade upon it; flatter him up as much as possible; it's as easy as A B C when you know the way.'

'For all that, Maud, you're four-and-twenty, and not yet married.'

'At least it is not the fault of my system, but I certainly have been unlucky; it's our horrid poverty that hinders me, and the awfully mean shifts we're put to. However, this time I really intend to persevere, and not to fail. A country house is such a capital opportunity. Dear me! what a dew there is rising; we had better go in, I think. I shouldn't at all like to catch a sore throat; besides, I must change my gown for tea.'

'You look very nice now,' cried Luce simply.

'No, my hair's out of curl, and this travelling dress is shabby—ah, my dear, you don't half understand the importance of dress—it is everything when one wishes to captivate. Now, I'll just explain to you: you see blue suits me best, so I am constant to it; but it requires a perfect genius to improvise perpetual variety in harmony, and you would be surprised to hear of all the shades of blue I have discovered; there's dark blue, and violet blue, and pansy blue, and Eton blue, and peacock blue, and electric blue, and cornflower blue, and—oh, ever so many more.'

'I had no idea dress was such a mystery. I don't think my aunt has made a study of it, she generally leaves it to her dressmaker, though she always buys a new dress for every *occasion*.'

'Dress comprises art, imagination, industry, perseverance,' glibly enumerated Maud. 'Ingenuity, taste, tact, delicacy, why, there really isn't a good quality in the world that you can't use in your study of it, especially if you're not rich.'

CHAPTER VII.

A RELUCTANT CANDIDATE.

THE Hardfasts, Dick Carrol, and a couple of neighbours comprised the present party, but the following week a large influx of neighbours was expected. Luce felt extremely indifferent to the company, and her only fear was lest Mr. Carrol should monopolize her uncle's whole time and attention, and interfere

with her enjoyment of the usual afternoon ride with Mr. Highview.

Dick arrived at tea-time. Maud, newly decorated, passed accidentally through the hall at that instant and gave him the first greeting. This was fortunate ; it took off the stiffness of his arrival as she sauntered into the library beside him chatting pleasantly, and made it clear that she was an old and valued friend. The Castle was very handsome, entirely new, the furniture new, or recently bought, and the gardens newly laid out.

It had taxed Lady Eleanor's skill and taste somewhat severely to prevent the lack of antiquity from impressing you as bare and comfortless. She had succeeded, however, as she generally did in whatever she undertook. The mansion, a large and imposing edifice, required furniture on the same scale of grandeur and magnificence. Lady Eleanor had ransacked Holland and Italy for her old oak and marqueterie cabinets, her inlaid ivory and ebony, her china, her tapestry, and her carvings. She had caused the ceilings to be painted by Italian artists, and the walls to be panelled with old leather from Cordova. There was everything to please the eye, and nothing to offend the taste, though possibly the quantity of beautiful things might, in some persons' opinion, have detracted from their quality, and conveyed the discordant impression of confusion in an old curiosity shop. The interior of the house was the true picture of its mistress's mind, irregular, capricious, and withal fascinating.

Lady Eleanor was a woman of limited culture, such as the age produces ; she really knew very little, though she had picked up a good deal, and discoursed eloquently on decoration and bric-à-brac.

Maud and Luce seated themselves on a crimson plush divan under a large tree-palm set in a massive gilt basin, while Dick with masculine heedlessness leant against the exquisitely carved oak chimney-piece on which stood some bits of priceless Chelsea, and Mrs. Hardfast and Lady Eleanor sipped tea out of handleless old Worcester cups.

'This is a perfect palace of enchantment,' said Dick, bending toward his hostess ; 'I can't think how you collected such quantities of pretty things.'

She smiled complacently.

'I generally manage to pick up things wherever I go. Ah ! I have saved Mr. Highview oceans of money, I assure you. If you buy from a dealer you are certain to be robbed. Now a

great deal of this furniture here I found in old country-houses, inns, Venetian palaces, and out-of-the-way places. This house literally cost nothing to furnish, and yet I have matchless cabinets and priceless tapestry.'

Mr. Highview, who had walked up to the table, on which stood a shaded lamp, to try and decipher the *Times* in the dim light his wife preferred, smiled and said :

'This house cost a pretty penny, though, my dear. I never meant to spend half as much when I began.'

'Of course !' Lady Eleanor effectively waved her plump white hand as if to avert further argument, 'people cannot expect everything for nothing ; only the Rothschilds can beat our collection of bric-à-brac ; and I assure you, Mr. Carrol, I am not to be surpassed in bargains.'

'I can quite believe it,' said Dick, turning to look at Maud, who made an artistic picture at that instant. She was leaning back against the crimson velvet cushion, in a pose of studied languor, her fair complexion and golden hair standing out in brilliant relief, her full lips curled in contemptuous indifference, her beautiful arm, the sleeve falling back and displaying its snowy contour, raised and reposing loosely among the cushions, while from her hand depended a feather fan. Dick could not help gazing admiringly, for she was tantalizingly beautiful, though his mind strayed absently to other memories. He was for ever and ever, like an ill-trained hound, harking back, and living over again the past ; for the love of imagination and regret cannot be blotted out in an instant, as we run our fingers over the drops on a window-pane and merge each little stream into one large one. Lady Eleanor was unaware of his pre-occupation ; she knew but little of Lady Fenchurch, and credited no woman except herself with unlimited power over men. She had welcomed him effusively and monopolized him instantly, and Dick felt at once that he now no longer belonged to himself. Yet his thoughts took a somewhat sombre tinge as he sat alone in his bedroom for a few moments before dinner thinking.

'I am in for it now I suppose, and I must try and succeed, though I hate the whole affair. I shall ask Highview who my opponent is. Maud was right,' he continued, diverging to another topic ; 'that niece of Lady Eleanor's is a plain girl. I suppose she will have money to compensate. Maud looks well ; she grows handsomer every day.'

And therewith the fortunate young man, who could find pretty women to flatter and talk to him wherever he went, rose,

and, ringing for his valet, began to dress for dinner. When the ladies left the dining-room with a noise and rustle of silky draperies, and Maud had thrown him one last seductive smile, Dick drew his chair up to that of his host, and began :

‘Tell me, Mr. Highview, is everything satisfactory, I am not likely to find any opposition, eh?’

‘I am sorry to say that is not the case—here have a glass of claret, it’s 1870 La Rose, and I can recommend it—the man who has chosen to come forward is a certain Sir Hilary Fenchurch.’

Dick seized the claret decanter and poured himself out a full glass, which he drank off before he answered.

‘Is this certain?’

‘Yes, I’m afraid so ; he has engaged Camps as his agent. Dewsnap the West Thorpe lawyer is working for him ; it means money I am afraid.’

‘Granny will do all that’s necessary in that way, but if I am to have no chance, and how can I, a young untried man, against Sir Hilary Fenchurch? would it not be better to retire gracefully before we spend our money, and engage our honour in the battle?’

‘My honour is engaged already ; I have promised that you shall come forward, and Lady Eleanor is bent upon it ; it would never do to disappoint her ; she has elected you as her champion young man, and you know what ladies are when they’ve made up their mind to a thing.’

Dick smiled uncomfortably ; he scarcely relished the idea of being any lady’s champion young man.

‘I do not care to be used as a puppet,’ he said, ‘and lead a forlorn hope.’

‘A forlorn hope! God bless you, it’s nothing of the sort. You shall write M.P. to your name before three months are over. Sir Hilary has not a chance, the Conservatives’ day is past. You must not take fright at the very outset ; what will Lady Eleanor say?’

Dick remained silent, and fingered his glass thoughtfully.

‘They like Londoners down here,’ put in one of the party, an elderly gentleman, whose red face gleamed like a peony from the folds of his voluminous white neckcloth ; ‘they think more of strangers than of the men who have grown up among them.’

‘Fellows about here are such cads,’ remarked another young man with a lisp.

‘Sir Hilary Fenchurch is not a cad, I believe?’ inquired Dick.

‘I don’t mean him, but the small squires and the well-to-do farmers ; the shopocracy are all as dull and obstinate as pigs. You’ll have your work cut out for you, I can tell you ; I wouldn’t stand for such a county as this.’

‘The prospect does not seem encouraging ; what do you say, Mr. Highview, shall we give it up ?’

‘What ! and leave the party in the lurch ? decidedly not ! The county can and will be won by a Liberal, and you’re the man.’

‘Oh ! certainly,’ said the afore-mentioned old gentleman, who appeared in imminent risk of choking, and whose nose was growing purple.

It was evident that fate intended Dick to be thrust into a position for which he had no especial liking, and the more fate forced it upon him the more he felt inclined to renounce the project.

‘You have made up your mind on all necessary questions, I suppose ?’ said Mr. Highview, dismissing Dick’s scruples airily. ‘Are you going to be an independent member, or follow Gladstone implicitly ? that’s the safest for a young fellow. There’s the franchise, and the Irish difficulty, and the agricultural labourers, and a dozen more things to occupy your attention. I fear I am still an old Whig, and perhaps you’ll consider me retrograde, but I confess I am a little afraid of such sweeping changes. Fortunately the Tories serve the purpose of putting on the drag when we are rushing down hill at a breakneck pace.’

‘I am not a party man,’ said Dick ; ‘I think people ought to have good air, and good water, and good houses ; it’s a shame they should have to live in pigsties ; but I don’t know how it is to be managed.’

‘Ah ! then you must stick to your party. The party will find all that out, and the party will do it, and you must just follow in the wake like an obedient sheep. No measure is possible till you have got up a party cry ; then a strong opposition helps rather than retards legislation—remember, to hate and abuse your adversaries is the first duty of a politician.’

‘Must I abuse Sir Hilary ? because I am really better with my fists than with my tongue, and should much prefer a good stand-up fight.’

‘I am sorry to observe, Carrol, that you are not half in earnest and impressed with the serious undertaking you have before you ; well, you had better see Gubbins in the morning, he will soon talk you over—he is our agent, you know.’

‘I hope he will, I’m sure ; but I wish I were well out of the affair.’

Dick already repented ; political life seemed a great deal of trouble, and only a shabby concern if you were to follow your leader in sheep-like fashion, and the antagonism to Sir Hilary Fenchurch, with the hard words and rough attacks that must be bandied about, and dealt round, displeased him mightily. Evelyn might take it as an insult. Evelyn the woman he loved ! He loved her still. He felt it—he knew it—and her husband was his opponent. Besides, a Parliamentary career was dull and tiresome when stripped of the glamour of excitement. Bruce had said it was a life worth living certainly, but then Bruce was an enthusiast, and enthusiasts, he believed, invariably existed in abject poverty, and died young and miserably. Everyone at Highview Castle seemed to take it for granted that Dick was urged by the purest political ambition and aspired to legislate, when the real truth remained—that he had no aspirations, and hated trouble. However, it seemed impossible to draw back, and the next day Dick and Mr. Highview jogged slowly along together in the direction of West Thorpe. Luce had lost her ride, as she feared, and was boxed up in the school-room helping Maud to trim a ball-gown.

The day was soft, the bare hedges hung with sparkling dew-drops ; the distance lay bathed in delicate violet and blue tints ; the birds twittered merrily in the bushes. Dick felt better ; he had slept well, and his usual easy temper had returned, and Mr. Highview’s face was a study of healthy placidity.

‘What kind of a man is Sir Hilary ?’ suddenly asked Dick ; ‘is he popular ?’

‘So-so ; he is of the good old school of sleepy Conservatives, kind-hearted but narrow-minded ; would help a friend with his last shilling, but considers poverty a convenient arrangement of Providence for the benefit of the upper classes. Prefers to encourage ignorance and respectful dependence in the peasantry ; thinks it natural that an aged labourer should look to the work-house as his only reward, and wonders that a man cannot keep his family on twelve shillings a week.’

‘I wish I could decide on the right line to take.’

‘Carrol, you must certainly have your opinions cut and dried ; if you can’t find out for yourself what is best, just become a disciple of somebody else, take it on trust ; only be sure of your facts, and, whatever you do, be thorough.’

‘Irresolution is my bane.’

‘Better be vicious than irresolute ; a man outgrows the one,

but the other clings about him like ivy about the tree, and smother's life eventually.'

West Thorpe wore an every-day appearance ; the sluggish river that belted the town flowed along in a dull, oily stream, showing reflections a trifle more deep and defined than usual ; a few scattered groups, evidently discussing politics, stood about here and there, and, as a labourer lifted his hat to Mr. Highview, he nudged his neighbour and pointed out in a hoarse whisper, 'the young man who's going to contest the county.' Some women, busy at the wash-tub, hurried to the doors wiping the soapsuds from their naked arms, and stared eagerly at Mr. Highview, who trotted quickly on, and drew up at the 'Dog and Partridge Hotel,' where Mr. Gubbins awaited them. The latter was short and thickset and confident, and his brisk jolly manner soon set people at their ease.

'I'm glad you've come, Mr. Highview,' he said, turning to the table spread with letters and telegrams ; 'there's plenty to do, and it's high time we got our address out. Sir Hilary's is placarded all over the town. I hope you are a thorough-paced Liberal, Mr. Carrol. It's the only paying thing nowadays. If you hang back neither party will claim you. You must promise everything, and carry out what you can afterwards, but above all display a fine programme.'

Dick, having consented to be a candidate, could not refuse to put himself into the knowing Mr. Gubbins's hands, who forthwith drew up a document full of glowing promise, advanced views, and compliments flattering to the intelligence of the free and enlightened electors which, having read over and pronounced to be very good, he sent off to the printers with the ink still wet upon the paper.

'Sir Hilary can't beat that,' he chuckled ; 'he only promises to uphold Church and State and the old institutions of the country. Vague, sir, very vague, no progress there, nothing to satisfy. Your Radical is the true friend of the people, and I'm happy to say they are getting to know it at last. Now, then, gentlemen, suppose we go and call on a few of your leading supporters.'

Yardley, the draper, was the first to fall under this category ; he was a lean, sallow, and discontented-looking person, and, when asked for his vote, replied : 'I won't promise, I'm sure, sir ; there's folk from London come, and they say this, and they say that, just to get themselves into Parliament. I've no call to complain of a Liberal Government. Certainly Mr. Gladstone is fair enough, and I dare say he does his best, but

we've all got to live, and I don't see as food is cheaper, or trade better. And, what with the Factory Acts and the early-closing movement, we don't do near as good business as we did.'

Dick, well primed by Gubbins, glibly explained that legislation had done much for the country, and that, if trade was not as prosperous as it might be, indeed, positively slack, so deplorable a state of things must be traced to the Tories, and their unreasonable foreign wars.

'Look here, now,' said Mr. Gubbins, 'how about sugar—isn't sugar cheap? Mrs. Yardley likes her tea sweet, and I'm sure the children love jam.'

'I don't deny as you speak fair,' said the draper, 'but the Government is always for helping those who can't help themselves or keep their earnings when they've got them; the respectable tradespeople that pay their way honestly get no privileges. Well, I can't promise—I'll see.'

Mr. Sands the grocer came next. He was strong on the Church question, and did not much care which Government was in power so long as it did not uphold the State Church. 'It's iniquity, that's what it is, sir, that State Church. I can't abide the parsons, with their copes and albs, and stuff and nonsense; red-hot popery, sir, that's what it is; and such a lot of new-fangled services, as if you come a bit late a man can't tell if it's the litany or the burial-service they're saying. We pay them parsons to preach the Gospel, don't we? Well, when my missus was ill for full six weeks, not one of 'em so much as came to read to her, though they call pretty smart for a subscription to the improvements of the church. Straw chairs, is it, sir? and paint and pictures, that's what they call improvements; I don't, sir, I calls 'em idolatrous. Well, they do say as the Prime Minister has leanings to Rome, but I can't believe it, for didn't he disestablish the Irish Church? and a very good job too. I read the Bible daily, and I know what's what in religion, and my missis she thinks the same as I do.'

Dick listened meekly to this diatribe, and when they passed out Gubbins whispered to the grocer, 'He is a true Christian, that young man, studies his Bible regularly; you needn't be afraid to vote for him.'

As they proceeded on their house-to-house visitation Dick soon discovered that the science of politics was a sealed book to most voters; each one had his own grievance or personal fad, and each one looked no further than the bounded horizon of his own prejudices, making himself and his private interest the pivot round which revolved the questions of progress, re-

ligion, social reform, or education. Dick, who was honest though indolent, found it hard to make the contradictory promises which his position demanded of him; he minded less the shaking of hands and kissing of babies than the false words and fair speeches which it was his duty impartially to distribute. But Gubbins made up for all shortcomings; he exhorted, praised, joked, and flattered each independent elector until he more or less obtained a promise of support. On the homeward road they fell in with an old labourer in a smock-frock, carrying a basket of tools on his shoulder. His white locks streamed in the wind, and his honest weather-beaten countenance was seamed and traversed by deep lines of care and toil.

‘Ah, Peter, how are you?’ said Mr. Highview cordially, reining up his horse to speak to him; then in an undertone to Dick, ‘He’s a stonemason, an honest fellow enough, though eccentric, and has the unbounded confidence of all his mates. Now, Peter, here’s the young gentleman who wishes to have the honour of representing you in Parliament; what chance has he, do you think?’

Peter touched his cap, lifted his eyes cautiously and quietly, and scratching his head replied, after prolonged deliberation, ‘He be a foine young gentleman for sartin to look at; but have he stuff in him? that’s what he must show us. He be a gentleman, and I s’pose he’s a gentleman’s ideas. He’s a Liberal, be he? Well, now, I never can tell rightly how they can put they four things together, a gentleman, a landlord, a magistrate, and a Radical. It’s a queer medley; there ain’t no Liberals now, we must be Radicals or nought—a friend of the people and one of the people. No, no, it’s nought to me what kind of Government’s in power; it strikes me there’ll always be poor men, and the rich will be always a-talking of helping ’em, but as our Lord said, and He *wer* a man of the people and no mistake, “The poor ye have always with you.” If the working man is to be helped, let him help himself, there’s noone else can do it; but, as far as I see, there must always be toil and trouble and sorrow, and then death—that’s the best of all; folks can rest and none to rail at ’em. Oh, I dare say the young gentleman ’ull do well enough, and I wish your friend luck, for you’re a kind and just landlord, Mr. Highview, and so long as there must be landlords, I’ve no fault to find wi’ ye; ye means well, I know; but I says to my mates, “Lor bless yer, don’t yer trust to the Government, but trust to yourselves.” Good-day, sir, I’ve a long trudge afore me still, and I wish you well, young

gentleman, that I do.' The old man nodded, took up his basket of tools, and trudged on.

'There, there's a specimen of the working man,' said Mr. Highview; 'he isn't grateful, and he isn't happy, and he works hard, and he enjoys his grumble, but he is patient: oh, the patience of the poor! it is wonderful, it passes all belief. He was a violent Trades-unionist and speaker once, but he has calmed down now, and has seen the error of his ways.'

'I wonder if that is what we shall all come to,' mused Dick, 'to spend the best years of our life pursuing a phantom, and then at the last say, "there is nothing good but death." I might as well never have lived.'

'Peter *has* lived for something. The condition of the labourers is much improved during the last few years—they are better housed, better clothed, better fed; and he has a son to whom he has given a good education, and who bids fair to be a master mason one day. Peter has only sobered down; he is getting old, you see, as we all must, and the enthusiasm of youth is giving place to quiet common-sense.'

'So much for education. Are we not better without it? It is Pegasus harnessed to a plough, and the divine animal has the worst of it, I think,' said Dick bitterly.

'Not a bit of it; when your joints grow stiff, it is a pleasure to go steadily, and youth, with all its daring, occasionally gets some remarkable unpleasant knocks and tumbles.'

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PEARL NECKLACE.

'HERE, Evelyn, is that the kind of thing you like?' said Sir Hilary, one morning, throwing a pale blue velvet jewel-case into Lady Fenchurch's lap.

'Hilary! Oh, how beautiful!' Evelyn glanced with admiration at the rows of snowy pearls reposing on their velvet cushion.

'You said the other night that you liked pearls better than any other precious stones, so I sent for these.' Sir Hilary put his hands in his pockets, and aired his back before the fire.

'They are lovely; but I meant nothing. I never thought of your giving me any; they must have cost a great deal.'

Lady Fenchurch's manner was more grieved than glad.

'Well, never mind; the money is mine to do as I like with,

and the pearls are yours to wear. Give me a kiss, and mind you put them on to-night.'

Evelyn raised her face obediently, and Sir Hilary, having deposited a kiss on her cheek, departed. His wife looked again sadly at the pearls. She had never cared for jewels or finery, and just now she cared still less. Her mind was running on other topics, and straying into forbidden grooves. It cost her a bitter pang to hear Dick's name in everyone's mouth, to be told of the favourable impression he had created, to read his address, and to find him the universal subject of conversation. Miss Fenchurch, pishing and pshawing, had received a local paper containing a report of his first speech, and Evelyn, with a blush at her own infatuation, had secured the paper and hidden it carefully at the bottom of one of her drawers. She had not yet met him ; indeed, she hoped to be spared this ordeal ; but she could not help listening eagerly for his praises. Sorely did she chide herself for disloyalty to Sir Hilary, while she regarded his presents as the price she received for the surrender of her love. Sir Hilary treated her like a child, petted and spoiled her, and gave her jewellery, fancying she needed nothing else ; but she, who had tasted one brief moment of dangerous rapture, knew that gifts were but a poor substitute for love. Had she only known sooner, or had she but possessed the courage to tell Sir Hilary the truth, and break off her engagement, all would have been well, but a foolish fear and a mistaken sense of duty had withheld her, and there was nothing for it now but to trample down the restless longing in her heart, and to become in thought, as she was in deed, a blameless wife. With a sigh Evelyn locked up her jewel-case, and ill at ease set forth on her daily walk. She directed her steps in the opposite direction to West Thorpe, and, having climbed a steep and stony lane, halted to take breath. The still November hush was over everything ; not a sound broke the silence ; it was too late for the song of the thrush, and too early for the bleat of the lambs. The sun struggled vainly through the heavy grey clouds that almost touched the long row of green fields with their black and leafless bordering of trees, stretching away into the dim distance ; the tints were crude and colourless, the sky low and gloomy. Evelyn leant her head on her hands, and rested by the stile thinking. She was too depressed to care much for the present, or to anticipate the future. A shadowy presentiment encompassed her. Presently the sound of a horse's trot roused her from her reverie, and fearful lest Sir Hilary should

find her sentimentalizing, to which mental pursuit he bore an undying grudge, she turned quickly from the stile towards the road. As she did so she perceived that, contrary to her supposition, Dick was the rider. He pulled up his horse abruptly, and stopped. Evelyn's colour had fled, her lips were white and trembling, her fine brown eyes uplifted pitifully. Dick could not pass on without speaking to her.

'Lady Fenchurch,' he said—he had schooled himself to speak the name—'have you forgiven me?' This was not at all what he meant to say, but it served the purpose as well as any other speech, and broke the ice. 'I have wished so much to meet you.' Here he jumped off his horse, and approached. 'I want to speak to you; may I walk with you a little way?'

Evelyn bowed her head; she dared not trust herself to speak.

'When we met last,' he pursued, 'you know what my feelings were——'

'Don't speak so,' she interrupted, 'that is all over; talk of yourself and your prospects.'

'I know that is all over,' he said bitterly; 'you spoilt my life for me, and you do not like to think of it; but, if even you forbid me to speak of them, my feelings are unchanged. I have done my very best to forget you, believe me; I have plunged into this political career which strikes me as barren to the core, and I work hard, which I hate, and try not to remember. I can't do more. Is my presence here so distasteful to you, can you not even forgive me for opposing your husband? I did not know when I accepted the candidature that there was any chance of his coming forward—for, of course, in that case I should never have allowed myself to be nominated.'

'I do not mind,' she said quietly, 'I shall never see you; our paths in life are quite separate; I have no possible right to dictate to you what you shall or shall not do. But I am glad also that we met to-day—because the last time—you misunderstood me;' her eyes filled with tears. Dick longed to kiss away those tears, but he walked doggedly along, his horse's bridle drawn through his arm, scarcely daring to look at her. To all appearances they were merely taking a casual stroll, but Evelyn's heart felt nigh to breaking, and Dick was mad with rage and love.

'We understand one another now,' he said presently. 'Oh yes, you will think of me sometimes—as a friend—I will carry

the remembrance of you to my dying day, best and dearest of friends—but—you look so pale—you are not unhappy ?

‘No, no ; I am very well. I heard that your first speech was much approved of—I was glad, you know—I should like you to persevere—some day perhaps you will be famous.’

‘Do you wish me to succeed then ?’

‘You forget Sir Hilary.’

‘I cannot even ask for your good wishes,’ he said bitterly ; ‘it is hard—and our political views don’t coincide, or perhaps you have none—do politics bore you ?’

‘No, indeed.’ It could not be doubted that no topic chosen by Dick would bore her, so long as he refrained from speaking of love. ‘Is it pleasant at Highview ?’

‘Pretty well, very magnificent !—they are most kind and hospitable—and Mr. Highview is a downright good fellow.’

‘And she ?’

‘Oh, she is good-natured enough, though she does treat that wretched little niece of hers with unnecessary severity ; fortunately, Maud takes her part and stands up for her.’

‘Maud Hardfast ! your cousin Maud ; is she staying there, too ?’

Evelyn’s voice expressed dismay.

‘Oh yes, she is there, and her mother also ; they are going to stay some time.’

‘Then I need not ask if Highview Castle is a pleasant place to stay in. Why do you deceive me, Dick ?’

In her emotion she spoke his name inadvertently, and emboldened by this he seized her hand.

‘Deceive you, Evelyn ! I could never do so.’

‘Oh yes, you can—you pretend to care for me, and all the while you are flirting and making love to your cousin Maud. Of course, you are right, she is very beautiful ; but it is cruel of you to deceive me, and make me wretched.’

Evelyn drew her hand away angrily.

‘Why, I am not engaged to her ; I don’t really care a fig for my cousin !’ this in a tone of surprise.

‘But you will marry and learn to care for her.’

‘We have known one another from childhood, we are only friends—surely you understand this.’

‘Just now I was to be your friend.’

‘So you are, Evelyn dearest. How you torture me !’

‘I am wrong, Dick ; don’t speak to me any more. I can’t help it ; I have no right to find fault. Who am I ? Oh, leave me, pray, and never, never come near me again !’

'I cannot leave you like this, Evelyn. How excited, how unjust you are! I don't want to marry; I am your devoted slave. It is you who drive me away—believe me, I ask no more than to be always with you.'

'And that can never be. Good-bye, Dick—Mr. Carrol.'

'Remember,' he said earnestly, 'I love you; I shall love you always; when you need me, send for me. I am always yours.'

He remounted quickly and rode off, leaving Evelyn in a dream. She had rejoiced to see him again. The sight of his handsome face had sent her pulses bounding madly with joy, till almost immediately her happiness was dashed by a fierce feeling of jealousy. Five minutes of conversation had thus utterly disarranged her life. She was impressed with a sense of her weakness, her wickedness, her ingratitude to Sir Hilary. Only flight could save her; it was ignominious, but sure. She must avoid Dick at all hazards; they must not meet again. Was she not trembling like an aspen-leaf, while her hand was cold, and her cheeks burning with a painful flush.

When she reached home, though feeling faint with bodily fatigue, she proceeded at once to the library, where tea was usually served. Sir Hilary was there in a sullen mood.

'You are late,' he said shortly, 'and must be tired.'

'Yes, I am tired.' She threw off her hat and gloves and sat down. 'I had a long walk. Shall I go and change my things, or make you some tea first?'

'My sister made the tea long ago, as you were out,' he answered, in an aggrieved tone.

'Oh! I am very sorry. It shall not happen again, Hilary.'

'Where did you walk?' he asked, trying to seem more gracious.

'Towards Fairholt; the road is less muddy.'

'Ah! then you must have met Dick Carrol. Pray did you speak to him? I heard he was to be at Fairholt Rectory to-day.'

'Yes, I met him.' Evelyn tried hard to keep her voice steady. 'We talked for a few minutes.'

'You never told me you knew him; it was quite accidentally that I heard he was staying at the Milners' when you were there last spring.'

Evelyn, sitting in the hot lamp-lit library, turned suddenly cold. What had Sir Hilary heard? What could he mean?

'I did not think you would care about it,' she said.

'My opponent is naturally of interest to me,' he said drily;

‘but you seem to forget this—wives do not always have their husbands’ interests at heart.’

‘Oh! but *I* have, Hilary—you know I have. I hope you will win the election—I should like to help you,’ she said warmly.

Sir Hilary gave a sneering laugh.

‘What is it, Hilary? what do you mean? have I offended you? Oh! do speak to me!’

‘Don’t disturb yourself, my dear; I mean nothing. Pray do not make a scene. You have walked too far, and are over-tired; go to your room and lie down a little.’

Evelyn rose. Her faintness and dizziness had increased. Sir Hilary’s advice was excellent; she would go and lie down. He opened the door for her with his old-fashioned gallantry of manner, and kissed her forehead as she passed out.

‘Lie down, dear, and you will be all right by dinner-time.’

Certainly, it might be all right physically with her, yet she could not divest herself of a vague fear and an apprehension that some deeper meaning lay in Sir Hilary’s words. Hitherto Evelyn had only thought of herself and of what might have been; now a far more dreadful phantom reared itself before her affrighted gaze—the phantom of domestic troubles and misunderstandings. Would the great fight soon include, not only her own passions and desires, but the subtle encroachments of a husband’s jealousy? He jealous of her, she jealous of Dick; what a tangle! Bitterly did she rue the folly and vacillation which had prevented her from proclaiming her love for Dick, and throwing off the bonds of her engagement, when to have done so would have cost neither truth nor irrevocable pain. There are few people who do not, like Evelyn, hang the veil of expediency before the inner portal of the temple of truth, dreading to look upon the features of the stern goddess without some shadow of protection. Evelyn had said to herself, ‘I cannot—I dare not,’ and the fiction had become fact. Sir Hilary was a reasonable man, and had she treated him reasonably she need never have regretted it. But it was too late now, and her slight deviation from the path of honesty was likely to lead her into a perfect maze of misery.

CHAPTER IX.

A NICE GIRL.

THE meeting with his lady-love sorely damped Dick's spirits, which were beginning to rise again with universal encouragement and the prospects of success. She was his lady-love still, at least, in his dreams ; he had not yet accustomed himself to think of her as the wife of another man. She was the same Evelyn, as sweet, as gentle, as pretty, yet not the same ; she was a woman now, oppressed by a woman's responsibilities, hampered by a woman's duties, and no longer the bright, careless girl he had known in that brief time of mutual passion. She was far removed from him ; indeed, it was a sin even to think of her. And yet he recalled with delight the sparkle of her eye, the flush of her cheek at his unexpected appearance, and the glory of ambition faded into insignificance when he compared it with the madness of love.

The company were just filing into dinner like an army of well-dressed mutes as Dick descended the staircase. He offered his arm to the nearest lady, who proved to be his cousin Maud. She was looking her best in a dress of pale blue, but he scarcely cared for her beauty to-night. She rallied him playfully on his moodiness, saying, 'I declare you must have seen a ghost to-day, you look quite scared.'

He had indeed seen a spectre, the ghost of a dead love, but he did not confess to her the correctness of her supposition. In the same bantering tone, he answered that it was the loss of her presence that had made him so dull, and praised her dress. Luce's observant eyes watched them across the table ; she knew Maud's enterprise, and she thought she read success in her smiles and blushes. Dick did not see that he was observed ; a plain little girl could scarcely arouse his vanity, and he allowed her plenty of leisure to pursue her observations. The dinner was a triumph of French cookery, for Lady Eleanor kept a culinary artist on the premises, and gave as much attention to her 'salmis' as to her guests' conversation. Dick, hungry from his ride, did justice to the delicacies set before him, and quaffed largely of his champagne-glass. Elated by the froth and sparkle of talk and wine, he presently ventured himself into a flirtation with Maud. This was not difficult with such considerate encouragement as she gave him, and, if hearts are not caught in the rebound, at least vanity is. Later in the evening Maud fluttered down on to a deep, soft couch, bedded with embroidered cushions and hidden behind a large porphyry vase.

Luce found her out there and took the place beside her, which Maud had mentally reserved for Dick.

'How cold it is to-night,' said the plain girl, shivering. 'I am sure there must be a frost.'

'Very likely ; I don't feel the cold,' said Maud, luxuriously spreading out her fair white hands and contemplating them. 'What a chilly little creature you are ! Go and warm yourself by the fire,' she added, her sympathy being largely mixed with a desire to get rid of her tactless friend before the arrival of the gentlemen.

'No, I will stay here a little. What were you and Mr. Carrol talking about at dinner ? He looked so interested.'

'He is always interested—with me ; we understand one another,' said the beauty languidly, not unwilling to be credited with power. 'Men generally like the society of women who can enter into their thoughts.'

'How can you enter into their thoughts ?' said plain matter-of-factness. 'What does a girl know of a man's real feelings ?'

'Dear me, Luce, how stupid you are ! One must study them, of course.'

'Exactly.'

Luce relapsed into silence. Luce had been studying too, with what success she knew not.

'Come over here, Luce,' cried Lady Eleanor sharply, at that instant. 'Why do you hide yourself away in a corner ?'

Luce rose obediently, and Maud thus attained her object. Bruce, in answer to a summons from Dick Carrol, had arrived at the Castle, and the two friends strolled in together from the dining-room ; but an electric flash from Maud's eyes promptly brought Dick to his senses, and a rapid twist of his heel landed him by the couch to which the vacant seat invited him. Bruce, who knew no one, glanced indifferently about ; he was like a mole, half-blinded by the light of many wax candles and the blaze of jewellery ; he missed his round table, the little reading-lamp, and the familiar folios. Lady Eleanor's loud, sonorous, and yet lady-like tones rang like a Greek chorus in his ear. As he stood motionless, not timid, yet strange, with luminous eyes and bent, reed-like figure, Luce, her lashes wet with tears, turned from the two eager, whispering figures on the couch, and beheld Bruce standing thus lonely and unobserved. A feeling of sympathy prompted her to approach him, and say, in a voice as soft as the summer wind :

'You are Mr. Carrol's friend, are you not ? He was telling us to-day how much he looked forward to your arrival.'

Bruce, responsive to her directions, sat down in a high-backed satin chair, and looked keenly at her before answering. The beauty of her eyes astonished him ; he was not accustomed to such eyes, for a tender, sensitive soul spoke from them. He was unusually indifferent to mere beauty of form and colouring, but intelligence and reasonableness in a woman seemed to him worthy of attention.

‘Yes, I trust I am Dick’s greatest friend. He is a dear fellow, a fine character, though undeveloped. The education of the day is answerable for that ; it fritters away a man’s energies and leaves him no time for concentration.’

‘You approve his political opinions?’ she questioned.

‘Certainly, they are my own. Progress must be every man’s ideal. I wish to see the moral condition, the social status, of the people raised. That, it seems to me, is the religion of politics, the spiritual side which everything worth labouring for must possess. Politics are not essentially earthly ; it is a mistake to treat them so, when they refer to man’s highest good, to the victory of morality over self-interest. Each man has a political duty towards himself and others from the mere fact that he is a citizen of the state ; to be indifferent to this duty is a blunder and a sin.’

‘I never thought of politics in that sense. You are a great student, Mr. Bruce, I believe?’

‘I could not live away from my books, those silent, faithful, satisfying friends.’

‘And you prefer them to men and women? Perhaps you are right,’ she added softly.

‘Excuse me, I did not say that. I am truly attached to Dick, with a quiet disinterested feeling that is perhaps somewhat old-fashioned, and I can see that the girl he is speaking to is extremely handsome. I think I understood her name to be Miss Hardfast.’

‘Yes, she is thought very beautiful,’ Luce sighed. It was not a sigh of envy, but yet it contained regret.

‘She is handsome, but it is not a beauty that appeals to me ; it is too sensual. The young lady is not troubled with soul. If Dick marries her it will be his ruin.’

‘Do you, who are his friend, think he will marry her?’ questioned Luce with unnecessary eagerness.

‘I cannot tell. He is not in love with her now ; if he were, his actions would be incomprehensible, and mysterious of course.’

‘Why?’

'Because love is a madness, and there is no reason in insanity.'

'That is a hard word. Mr. Carrol is like what I imagine Alexander must have been. He is so strong, and healthy, and handsome.'

Bruce looked at her with more attention; the girl's tones, soft as they were, had a warmth that puzzled him.

'Yes, perhaps; I never thought of his good looks, but of course women notice these things. And so you have read too Miss Windermere, I perceive you are a student, as you took a classical personage for your simile; pray be faithful to your studies; there is nothing to be compared with them; they are the staff of life.'

'I am fond of reading, but I don't think deep study is good for women.'

'Why so?'

'Because it makes them sometimes discontented with the common-place.'

'Well?'

'And—and because men do not like it.'

'Some men do.'

'No, no indeed it does not answer; it is better not.'

At this moment there occurred a general move among the company; a lady rose and went to the piano to sing; some of the gentlemen disappeared into the smoking-room—music has that effect occasionally of inciting a desire for soporifics—and the two speakers were parted by the wave of motion, but Maud and Dick sat on behind their porphyry vase happy and quiescent.

'And so you speak in the Town Hall to-morrow,' she was saying with a solicitous deflection of her voice; 'I must go even if I have to walk alone there; I do so want to hear you speak.'

'I had rather not; you will make me nervous.'

'You nervous, impossible!' Maud threw a cursory glance at his robust figure, his finely modelled hands, his clear eyes, and ruddy complexion, which were the incarnate expression of perfect health and strength.

'I assure you, I am really very nervous.'

'Leave that to the women, who are not sure of their own good looks and their powers of pleasing, like poor Luce, for instance; how shy she is! What does your agent say?' she added with interest.

'He is very sanguine; but then he is always sanguine. He is the kind of man who in a railway accident, with the dead

and dying around him, would exclaim, "Thank goodness, there are a good many saved; it is not so bad as it might have been."

'What a charming temperament! I should like to know him.'

'Naturally, therefore, I cannot quite trust to his assurances; but still I hope to be successful, for I hate to be foiled at anything.'

'And why should you?' Maud contrived to throw a suggestive inflection into her voice conveying the certainty that, given Dick's powers, success was inevitable.

'But now we really must go,' she said, seeing the room nearly empty, and Luce hovering near, 'I want you to play a game of billiards with me.'

Lady Eleanor, however, who had her own ends in view, waylaid her at this instant, and carried her off to consult about some knotty point of dress or arrangement, and Luce and Dick were left standing alone.

'I have been talking to your friend, Mr. Bruce,' she said rather timidly; 'how pleasant he is, and how devoted he seems to you.'

It was almost the first time she had addressed Dick since he entered the house, and her soft harmonious voice pleased his fastidious ears. Maud's voice was clear and strong and agreeable enough in a fresh common-place way, but it had none of the delicate modulations and thrilling reedy sweetness of this one.

'I can't half appreciate Bruce,' he answered heartily; 'he is so good, and so unselfish, and so clever; he works patiently and uncomplainingly, and really works for bread. It is not play, like everything I have done hitherto.'

'But you are doing real work now?'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'It must be pleasant to be a man,' said Luce reflectively, 'to have a definite object to labour for, and to be able to follow one's own impulses.'

'I am afraid one follows them rather too often; men have more temptations than women, you know.'

'But then they are not nearly so much hampered. This election, now, I suppose it is your own choice?'

'Yes, and I assure you I care very little about it.'

'Indeed! I think the sense of power must be fine, it must be nice to feel that you can sway a multitude, that people listen for your opinion—don't you like that?'

'Well, you know my opinion isn't worth much; I know very little of these matters.'

'But then you are learning.'

Luce's quiet timid manner rather amused him—he thought he would try and draw her out; she paid him no compliments, and yet seemed to think far more seriously of his future than Maud, notwithstanding her sugar-plum flatteries. The atmosphere of the one girl braced, while the other enervated him.

'Are you going to the Town Hall?' he asked. 'I hope so.'

'I think we are all going; Maud Hardfast has set her heart on it, and my aunt is so very fond of her, she is sure to humour her wishes.'

'And are you not fond of her?'

'I like her very well, I don't think I am *fond* of anyone. Does not that imply a kind of renunciation of self, which I have certainly not yet reached——'

'And cannot understand?'

'Oh, yes, I can understand it. I can understand a man giving up everything for a woman, and caring only to please her, and even doing foolish things, and——' here Luce caught Dick's astonished gaze, and hesitated; 'but of course I do not know anything about such things, and am never likely to.'

'Why not?' he questioned kindly.

'Because I am plain, and men only care for beauty, and no one is likely to take a fancy to me.'

'Men like nice women. I am sure you are nice.'

Luce coloured painfully. He was laughing at her, she thought, and she felt the sting more acutely, because for once she had forgotten herself, and spoken out frankly without regard to conventionality.

'Why do you stop and look at me so?' he asked.

'I think it very bad taste on your part to laugh at a girl because she says openly what you are thinking in your heart,' said Luce.

'By Jove! I—I beg your pardon; that isn't true. I wasn't laughing, I was thinking I had never met a really modest girl before. I am not a good hand at making protestations, but upon my word, believe me, I wouldn't hurt your feelings for the world.'

'Plain people ought to have no feelings.'

'Look here, Miss Luce, to show you I mean what I say, and to prove to me you don't bear malice, will you talk to me again

to-morrow evening, and tell me some of your ideas? They are so fresh and new to me, you know; I did not think it possible for a woman to be entirely without vanity.'

They had wandered thus talking into the billiard-room, and a reproachful look from Maud, who was playing billiards, arrested him.

'Come here,' she cried, 'please chalk my cue, and do tell me what stroke I had better make next. You said I was to be your pupil, and you have never been near me at all.'

Dick expressed his regret, chalked the cue, and, shutting one eye, deliberated upon the chances of Maud's ball hitting the cushion and cannoning off, or rolling straight into the pocket. The game was exciting, and Maud, who knew how to pose herself so as best to display, when bending over the table, the full curves of her graceful bust, and the rounded plumpness of her beautiful arm, took every precaution that Dick should not again stray from her side. She had been practising all the afternoon by herself, and now protested, with pretty little cries of alarm, that she could never, never, never hit that ball unless Dick would just show her how to hold the cue, and stand beside her to give her courage. When the stroke was completed, she would turn to Dick confidentially and express boundless gratitude for his advice. Dick, who was a fine player, grew proud of his pupil, and bestowed no further thought on quiet Luce, who sat by knitting a stocking, and listening half unconsciously to the spicy gossip with which Mrs. Hardfast and Lady Eleanor regaled her ears.

CHAPTER X.

THE MEETING IN THE TOWN HALL.

It was decided to have an early dinner in preparation for the meeting in the Town Hall. Mr. Highview, Dick, and Julian Bruce were to start first, and the ladies to follow. The household was thrown into a state of confusion, for some of the servants had been given permission to attend the meeting, and the ladies' maids were running to and fro, answering the loudly pealing bells, and hurrying their mistresses' toilettes, in preparation for the unusually early meal. Luce was dressed in good time, and descended to the drawing-room, where she amused herself with a book of poetry, pending the arrival of the rest of the party.

She was calm and unhurried; it was not her habit to hurry;

she had observed its disadvantages in the case of her aunt, who was always writing letters, or giving orders, or holding audiences up to the very last moment, and then required to be inducted expeditiously into her gown by a trembling maid with awkward fingers, who generally broke the lace or fastened the hooks awry, to a running accompaniment of angry rebukes from Lady Eleanor. Mr. Highview kept to his dressing-room at these times, and slunk quietly downstairs when he was ready, lest he should be called on presently to adjudicate between mistress and maid, for after a certain period of terror and semi-imbecility the maid generally turned and treated her mistress to saucy answers, with the natural result of speedy dismissal. As these occurrences were frequent and the scarcity of good maids great, Lady Eleanor usually passed a great many weeks in a condition of abject dependence upon an obliging housemaid's services. Maud and Mrs. Hardfast possessed one maid between them, or rather it might be said that Maud had a maid, for the latter spent two hours with the daughter before she was permitted to bestow five minutes on the mother; and Mrs. Hardfast would wander helplessly in and out of her daughter's room a dozen times in dressing-gown and slippers to find Maud invariably just trying on a wreath, taking down her hair that it might be done over again and please her better, or ordering another dress to be brought from the cupboard instead of the one previously decided upon. As these were the conditions of the ladies' toilets, it is needless to add that an early dinner disarranged everything, and that the poor maids had an extra hard time of it on this occasion. At last, however, the party started, six on each side, in an omnibus. Maud sat next the window, saying she required air; opposite her was young Arthur Sterney, one of the company, and beside her Luce, whose fingers she could pinch occasionally when desirable, and whose elbow she could nudge if anything specially amusing or piquant attracted her notice. Luce was very quiet; she was thinking of Dick, and wondering how he would comport himself on the platform; whether his handsome face would grow red, or his eyes wander, and if he would stammer or stutter. She hoped not with all her heart, and felt quite sick as she reflected on the possibility of his breaking down. Maud, on the contrary, full of spirits, laughed and talked and kept her hand in by an innocent flirtation with Arthur Sterney, who had torn himself away from London and the theatres, hearing that she was to make one of the party at the Castle. The other occupants of the omnibus were Mr. Glossary, the eminent critic, who cracked jokes and told

spicy and improper stories to Lady Eleanor, under cover of her fan, as they rattled over the stony roads, and Lord Newlands and his wife. He had rendered valuable assistance to the Liberal Government at one period, and had been rewarded by a peerage in consequence. Lady Newlands, a Manchester heiress, dressed magnificently in the richest of brocades and satins, but remained a little uncertain as to her h's, and always spoke of her husband as 'my lord.'

The omnibus arrived in good time at the door of the Town Hall, around which clustered a crowd of dirty boys and men, with a few women holding babies, kept in order by an army of policemen. Maud stepped out gracefully, aided by Arthur Sterney, and followed by Luce, who tripped along by herself; next descended Lord Newlands, who inadvertently trod on Lady Eleanor's toe and caused her to exclaim, under her breath, 'Unmannerly wretch!' A great hunt then ensued among the cloaks and cushions for Lady Eleanor's smelling bottle, which was at last found under the seat, having been used by Lady Newlands as a footstool during the drive; finally the stately procession marched up the hall and took their places on the long front row of chairs provided for them. A great buzz of voices filled the air, people streamed in at the doors, and a few lads at the back tried to get up a disturbance. They were promptly hustled and knocked about into silence, and the proceedings commenced. Mr. Highview, the chairman, in a neat little speech recapitulated the object of the meeting, and begged leave to produce the new candidate for the honour of representing the county in Parliament. Dick stepped forward a little sheepishly and began, 'Ladies and gentlemen.' A storm of applause and hisses interrupted him; the hisses, having been hired, and being in the minority, were after a little while subdued, and Dick recommenced. He did not speak badly. He hesitated occasionally and repeated himself, and his political statements, though strong and damaging to the other side, were scarcely as clear or as logical as might have been wished; but his words were simple and almost colloquial, and thus appealed to the majority, and his sentiments were unexceptionable and manly. He created a favourable impression, and at the end of his speech the applause decidedly drowned the hisses. Dick sat down, a trifle out of breath and rather red in the face, but happy and satisfied. Mr. Highview slapped him on the shoulder, remarking, 'You'll do very well, my dear fellow; you've said quite the right thing, and pleased everybody.' And Maud, who had nearly split her new tan suède gloves in applauding vigor-

ously, now waved a red fan to and fro, familiarly, to imply that the speech had received her fullest approval.

Dick, during the whole of his speech, had been conscious of nothing; he could not have told who was in the hall, nor whether the three first benches were occupied by his personal friends; only once he had felt a kind of attraction, and caught a pair of eyes fixed upon him that seemed to pierce into his brain and read his very thoughts. The eyes belonged to Luce, who, breathless, with parted lips, had followed every argument, thrilled to every inflection of his voice, reassured him by her sympathy and ready comprehension, and encouraged him by her approbation when he felt doubtful of the soundness of his arguments. And all this without speaking a word or moving a muscle, simply by the power of her eyes and of her self-abandonment to his influence. It was very strange. The quiet little girl seemed to comprehend him, to be warmed with the cool fire of his own rather lukewarm enthusiasm, so that involuntarily he made his points for her, sought her steady gaze, and knew that she was pleased. He was not accustomed to such sympathy, and felt grateful, that through the awkwardness of speech his true meaning had been interpreted, like a dumb animal whose demands for sugar or caresses are understood.

It was Bruce's turn next. He rose with a jerk, a lanky figure in a loose tweed suit, stopped for an instant, and looked round the hall with a wistful reflective gaze, then stroking his hair back from his high forehead, he spoke in quiet monotonous tones. Sundry exclamations burst from the audience, and a voice from the crowd cried, 'Ain't he thin? I wonder if he's a vegetarian!' another, 'My eyes, don't he want drilling!' another, 'Bill, is not he like a nice young hop-pole?'

Utterly unmoved, the tall reedy figure, with the ascetic face and the long thin hands, proceeded steadily with his harangue until the very noisiest consented to listen. The quiet force of his character had conquered them. He expounded at considerable length his ideas of true politics, from an utterly unconventional standpoint. He gave them none of the usual common abuse of their adversaries, no claptrap allusions, but he spoke like a philosopher; and as he warmed with his subject, his white face glowed, and his eyes dilated, until the concluding words fairly moved his audience to enthusiasm. 'Friends, it is not for any party that I plead, but for the people. The voice of the people is the voice of God; the people are the first and last word of the British constitution; reform touches the people, the rights of property affect the people, religion is

the religion of the people, and politics means the welfare of the people.' Shouts broke from the furthest corners of the packed multitude, applause shook the rafters and echoed over people's heads; the uproar was deafening. 'Hes the fellow for us.' 'My eyes, he is an out-and-out demagogue.' 'That chap has got the gift of the gab.' 'Are you a Paddy with your fine blarney?' were some of the cries bandied about, but the general impression made was to the effect that he was a true and earnest man. Bruce retired to the back of the platform, paying no attention to the noise of the multitude; then turned deadly white, and begged a glass of water. The real orator, primed with the living fire of the gods, is moved himself with the force of his own convictions, and his influence over others is but the feeble reflex of the quiverings of his own soul. The rest of the speeches fell flat. Lord Newlands drivelled on, on every kind of irrelevant subject, till the impatience of the audience could no longer be subdued. Then Mr. Highview neatly joined together the various threads dropped by the speakers, and bound them into one consecutive and plausible whole, and, after a vote of thanks to the chairman, the meeting terminated.

The order of the return journey was somewhat modified. Maud went in the landau with Lady Eleanor, and Luce sat next to Dick in the omnibus.

'How well you spoke?' Luce said at last, emboldened by the murmur of voices around her.

'Do you know,' he confessed, 'that you were an enormous help to me? You have such a strange power; it seemed to me when I looked at you that you knew what I was trying to say, that you were disentangling my thoughts for me, and pushing me on. Have you ever been told this before——?'

'Yes, I have. I think the reason is that I am conscious, as it were, of two lives; the one is my own, the other that of any persons in whom I am interested. I seem to feel their sensations; to know what they are experiencing; to understand the effect of things upon them. I can almost speak their words before they utter them——'

'I never met with anything like it before,' said Dick thoughtfully; 'I should like you to be always present when I have to make a speech.'

'Should you?' Luce blushed a little under her swans-down.

'Yes. It is a most curious faculty; what can it be, do you think?'

'I suppose it is mesmeric. I live a great deal alone, and

then I am very imaginative. When I am, as it were, placed in mental contact with persons, I live their life instead of my own, and am worked upon by the conditions that affect them——'

'Have you ever talked to anyone about these things? I should like to know if——'

'Oh, no, no!' Luce grew anxiously agitated; 'please never mention anything about me. I should not like to be discussed. If you had not found this out, I should never have told you——'

'I promise not to speak of it, but tell me one thing. You said you must be interested in people before you felt this strange kind of sensation. Then you were interested in me?'

'I suppose I was,' she said shyly.

'We have scarcely ever spoken. Do you know that was a great compliment to pay me?' he said after a pause.

'I did not mean it as a compliment.'

'I am sure of that. You never compliment people, and yet you say prettier things than anyone I ever met. What did you think of Julian Bruce to-night?'

'He was splendid.'

'Wasn't he? Now there's a man you ought to be "*en rapport*" with.'

'No, he is stronger than I am; he is too self-contained; one cannot pierce to the depths of his soul. He would never have felt my influence as *you* did to-night.'

'Then I shall keep you all to myself, like a kind of Egeria: is that a compact; will you help me?'

'I will do what I can,' said Luce simply; 'but you overrate my power. I am a very ordinary, quiet kind of person. Now Maud Hardfast, for instance, is much cleverer.'

'Perhaps, but you are not to be compared together. Maud is not really sympathetic, though she is very pleasant.'

'And I am never thought pleasant. My aunt says I am so silent that no one cares to talk to me; in fact, Mr. Carrol, I am a failure—a social failure. Haven't you found that out?'

'No, and what's more, I don't believe it.'

A sudden jerk here informed them that the omnibus was drawn up against the steps of the Castle, and one by one the company filed into the dining-room, where a tempting supper was laid out.

'What a ghost you look!' whispered Maud unkindly to Luce, who in her white cloak, and with her white cheeks, presented rather a spectral appearance. 'I'll bet you've been

asleep ; it's such a stupid thing to do, one always wakes up to resemble an owl in an ivy-bush, blinking at the light. We sang all the way home. Arthur Sterney has a capital voice.' Then Maud took Dick under her protection, and insisted on his helping her to chicken mayonnaise, and Lady Eleanor found fault because the footmen were so slow, and there were too many lights. Lady Eleanor's complexion was a little too delicate to stand a glare. Arthur Sterney began to tell quiet Luce stories about burlesque actresses, and Lord Newlands in a pompous voice entertained Mr. Highview with his views on politics, and Lady Newlands hunted everywhere for a diamond brooch she declared she had lost, and requested honest Bruce, who was dreamily munching sandwiches, to get up and shake the skirts of his coat, lest the brooch should have fallen into them. Meanwhile the butler poured him out a full glass of champagne, which in his disturbance he forgot to drink, a trifling fact which caused the butler to confide to the housekeeper that 'that 'ere Bruce was a strange fellow, not used to the ways of gentlefolks, he dared say.'

And then everybody having congratulated everybody else on the success of the evening, the ladies tripped away with a thousand good-nights, the elder ones smothering a yawn behind their bed-candlesticks, the younger ones smiling at the men standing below, and the male members retired to the smoking-room to drink whisky and water, and discuss politics, hunting, racing, and women, until one by one slipped off to bed, in the small hours of the morning.

CHAPTER XI.

'GRANNY.'

THE meeting in the Town Hall introduced a lull into the political campaign, and the following day, when Dick received a missive from his grandmother informing him of an indisposition traceable to a bad cold, and expressing a wish to see him, he determined to start off at once and pay the duty visit which had been so long deferred. Not that he objected to stay at what was virtually his home, nor that he was wanting in the fullest love and respect to his grandmother, who indeed deserved the very fullest, but because Long Leam was an extremely dull house, and his uncle and Aunt Vincent were staying there. Between his Aunt Vincent and himself there raged an honest,

uncompromising hatred, which it may be confessed Dick took no trouble to diminish. However the disagreeable duty had to be accomplished, and, supported by the faithful Bruce, whose arrival was duly notified to Mrs. Carrol by telegram, Dick started for his home.

Long Leam lay in a wooded, undulating district; the house itself stood on low ground, and might be considered an uninteresting pile of eighteenth-century architecture, but the vast gardens and splendid grounds were an object of admiration to all visitors. They had remained untouched ever since they were laid out in the stiff and formal manner affected by our ancestors; the yew hedges had waxed round, and high, and portly, till they formed a massive wall of greenery; the turf grew as delicate, as thick, and as soft, as a lady's drawing-room carpet; the gravel walks, broad and smooth, showed neither weed nor fissure; the square pieces of water, euphoniously called lakes, lay clear, and still, and limpid in the sunshine, as when they reflected the faces of a powdered belle or a bewigged beau; the trees and shrubs, carefully tended and punctually trimmed, reached the perfection of beauty and luxuriance; the old sun-dial stood, as it had stood for more than a century, stolid and moss-grown and venerable, telling the time with praiseworthy inaccuracy; the very wild-fowl, fluttering and splashing about the reeds and bulrushes that adorned the edges of the mere, were descendants of the old birds introduced in the reign of the first George. Under those groves it was said Pope had walked, and in that alley Burke composed some of his most famous orations. The interior of the house corresponded; the rooms, large and lofty, were but barely furnished, the sofas of an uncomfortable period, hard and high-backed, the damask curtains somewhat faded, and the tables spindle-legged and ugly; but then the beauty of the cabinets, massive and unique, the collection of old china, uncracked and unbroken, perfect and priceless, compensated for these drawbacks. The old print that hung in the hall depicted the mansion as it existed in the time of Queen Anne; and a comparison of the picture and the reality showed scarcely a bush or shrub to be missing. A respectable flavour of antiquity hung about the mansion, and, according to the disposition of the visitor, inspired him with feelings of gravity or contempt. The free-and-easy spirit of modern society was entirely absent from these walls, of which the mistress herself was not the least appropriate adornment. A handsome old lady, with a complexion of rose and white as delicate as precious china,

kind blue eyes, and the tenderest smile imaginable always hovering on the fine curved lips, so gracious and so innocent, a mouth that bespoke her nature, a nature never smirched with the sand and dirt so apt to bespatter us all, but full of imaginative charity, the charity that can picture others' temptations and make allowance for them; she lived alone, and ruled her house with a mixture of gentleness and firmness. Always clad in the daintiest of silks, preserved by a little white muslin apron, her white hair gathered modestly beneath a pretty cap, set with ribbons to match her gown, and a bunch of keys and scissors hanging by her side, she formed a lovely picture. And even those who sneered on the score of old-fashionedness were constrained to own her beauty; in her, old age was adorable, and the decline of life a glorious sunset. 'Granny' she was called by her son, Mr. Vincent Carrol, and her daughter-in-law Mrs. Vincent, and 'Granny' she was to everyone *par excellence*. Her stately dignity and her sweet sprightliness, her gentle consideration for the feelings of the humblest, were, indeed, things inexplicable to Mrs. Vincent, who was formed of coarse common clay, and rather despised, while she traded on the Chelsea-china brilliancy and daintiness of the grandmother's composition. Mr. Vincent, who must have inherited some alien blood, loved his mother in a rough downright fashion, laughing a little at her peculiarities, yet rejoicing in the certainty of her generosity and forgiveness. For Mr. Vincent was her second son; the eldest, Dick's father, had died young, quickly following his young wife, and Dick was the direct heir to Mrs. Carrol. That this brat should have lived, and have lived to be strong and handsome and hearty, considerably vexed Mr. Vincent and his wife, who had extravagant tastes and a quiver full of children. In vain Vincent, who was a bluff and red-faced sportsman and a constant attendant at racecourses, ventured to cavil at his mother's openhandedness to her dependants and to her grandson; in vain Mrs. Vincent preached the necessity of self-denial for young people; Mrs. Carrol, in her sweet, quiet way, paid everything young Dick asked her, and a good deal he had the grace not to ask. For Dick Carrol had been given an Eton education, including unlimited pocket-money, had enjoyed a university career with its attendant hunting and other luxuries, had betted too, and lost occasionally, and his grandmother, after a few serious words of warning, had settled his debts. Now she was embarked in all the expenses of an election, and, to use Vincent's words, 'there seemed no end to the thing.' Vincent himself

would have liked to bet largely and keep racehorses, but his means only allowed of clandestine and fringe-like visits to racecourses, and a doubtful hanging on to the skirts of turf notoriety, and the contrast between his purse and his natural desires sharpened his jealousy and dislike of his nephew. Mrs. Vincent, who was no blood relation, and, therefore, as she said, had no appearances to keep up, nourished this dislike with all her might, and sought on every occasion to place Dick in an unfavourable light before his grandmother's eyes. There was scant difficulty in this, for stories of Dick's wildness or reports of his lavish extravagance constantly reached her ears, and were repeated with considerable variation and embroidery to the unwillingly listening grandmother. Mr. and Mrs. Vincent contrived, on their part, to extract a good deal of comfort from Granny; they stayed with her, accompanied by their entire family of eight children, for weeks together, they shot and ate her game, they rode her horses, they made her pay for dear Lottie's doctor, or Tommy's vacation tutor, or Mary's singing lessons; they drove out in her carriage, and paid visits to their friends, and usually arrived, dressed in such shabby clothes, that, from pure shame, Granny consented to clothe them anew in fashionable garments. At this moment, Mr. and Mrs. Vincent had arrived on a nice long visit. Dick, being aware of this fact, and knowing how grating to his nerves was the proximity of his aunt and uncle, nowise relished the prospect, but comforted himself by the recollection of Bruce's kind and genial society, to which he resolved chiefly to confine himself.

'Dick comes to-day,' said Mrs. Vincent at breakfast (Granny was having hers on a tray in her bedroom, in consequence of her indisposition), 'and I understand he brings a friend, a Mr. Bruce; do you know anything of him?'

'I've seen him,' replied her husband, plunging into a pheasant-pie and carefully extracting all the truffles he could find; 'a seedy-looking fellow, rather short-sighted, and can't shoot.'

'That's a blessing! Then dear Watty can take his place and make the fourth gun.'

'It isn't necessary for the boys always to shoot.'

'Poor dears! they get little enough of it, and now Dick returns they will get less.'

'They're welcome to my share at least, for on Thursday I'm going over to Westhorpe to see a little black mare that I am told is a wonder, and Friday I must attend Bignell races.'

'And you will be away nearly every day while Dick is here.'

Well, you *are* a fool !' retorted Mrs. Vincent, closing her lips with a sharp click.

'Why, he doesn't *want me* !' said Mr. Vincent innocently, rolling his blood-shot goggle-eyes round the table.

'*I* want you. If Dick has his grandmother all to himself, he will get anything in the world out of her,' retorted Mrs. Vincent.

'Oh, bother ! I can't turn amateur detective.'

'You might at least take a little trouble for the sake of your family.'

'If that little black mare is as good as they say, she will about win the Liverpool, and I expect to pick up a tenner or two at Bignell races ; that is some good to my family, isn't it ?'

Mr. Vincent sat down and drank off his tea with a satisfied gurgle.

'You men are all the same ; you never look beyond your nose,' snapped his wife.

'And you women are always nagging. Cannot a man be master in his own house ? I should like to know who is to prevent him from doing as he pleases ?'

'When he pleases to fritter away his money in racing and gambling and idle amusements, he is not fit to be master.'

'Oh, isn't he ? I'll just show you.' Mr. Vincent rose, and his face grew red while he spluttered, 'Mind your own business, and I'll mind mine. I'll trouble you not to interfere in my affairs. I'll race if I please, and I will bet if I please, and you are not the person who can stop me. I shall do just as I please, and your duty, madam, is to obey—d'ye hear ?—to *obey* !'

Therewith Mr. Vincent marched out of the room, holding his head very high, and passing by the butler's pantry, looked in and bethought him to ask for a nip of brandy, fortified by which cordial, he strode round to the stables. Mrs. Vincent, meanwhile, shrugging her shoulders, placidly finished her breakfast, gathered up her letters, and proceeded to Granny's room. A little quarrel with her husband in nowise disturbed the harmony of her married life ; she was accustomed to these trifling scenes, which broke the monotony of her humdrum existence and gave her a taste of the excitement which more worldly women find in intrigue or flirtation. Besides, she knew that her husband relied on her judgment and generally followed her advice, and, though she regarded him as a fool, and felt that he must be driven and guided for his own good, occasional kicks and rebellion against bit and bridle only served to solidify her in-

fluence and to give her a pleasing sense of power. Granny's own room was the smallest in the house, a den of some six feet by twelve, but here at least she reigned supreme ; the nook was sacred from intrusion on the part of the young Vincents, and, being chiefly furnished with shabbily-bound books, and littered with business papers, appealed neither to cupidity nor to an æsthetic sense of beauty.

Yet Granny was very happy here. She was free from Mrs. Vincent's carping meanness, and from Vincent's noisy jokes. She was surrounded by her beloved books—her poets and her classic authors ; for Mrs. Carrol, confessing it only shamefacedly and to her intimate friends, was a true student. Shakespeare, Milton, and the Lake poets rose to her lips unconsciously, and it would have been difficult to find a quotation which she could not cap, nor quickly name the author. Her education was of the old-fashioned solid order ; she possessed no showy accomplishments beyond a pretty talent for water-colour painting, which she continued to cultivate even with the drawbacks of old age and spectacles ; but everything within the bounds of reason that a cultivated woman ought to know was familiar to her. She had decided opinions on literature, on art, on politics, and on religion, though a peculiarly bashful and modest reticence made people sometimes think that old Mrs. Carrol was weak and easily led. So much of her life was unselfish, so unassuming were her own personal pleasures, consisting of her garden, her charities, and her books, that the warmth of strong passion and earnest affection that lay buried in her tender heart was almost hidden from the world. People called her a nice intelligent old lady, but few understood that the ordinary run of men and women were scarce worthy to be named with her. Dick alone appreciated her ; he had realized something of the wealth of unselfish devotion that formed the keystone of Granny's character, but even he presumed on her kindness and tried her patience severely. Mrs. Carrol looked up somewhat surprised at Mrs. Vincent's knock and almost simultaneous entrance.

'What is it ?' she said gently, yet with a tinge of vexation in her quiet voice.

'I am sure I hope I don't disturb you, but I wanted a little talk with you, and I thought Dick would be here directly.'

'I certainly hope he will arrive to-day, but I do not expect him so early,' said clever Granny, undeceived by this transparent pretext.

'What prospects has he of the election ?' continued Mrs. Vin-

cent, sitting down on a chair whence she calmly ousted a fat dictionary and two volumes of poetry.

‘I believe they are very good.’

‘It is very strange, isn’t it, for so young a man to be elected M.P. for the county? I think Vincent would have been a far more respectable choice,’ she continued, smoothing out her apron sedately.

‘I do not know that Vincent wished it, or was asked, and I am very glad for Dick to have an occupation,’ said Mrs. Carrol.

‘To be sure, anything is better than that deplorable racing,’ said Mrs. Vincent, fixing her bead-like eyes on the old lady, ‘and Dick is so *very* fond of the turf.’

‘Young people like excitement. I suppose it is natural enough, but without doubt Dick will steady down; his wish to get into Parliament proves it.’

‘Really! Well, now I thought it was Lady Eleanor that had willed it; she is a managing woman, I believe, and rules everyone connected with her. I only met her once, and I thought her most objectionable; she had a crowd of young men round her, and was dressed splendidly, but dreadfully low-necked. I can’t think how Mr. Highview can stand the show and expense.’

‘He has a large fortune,’ Mrs. Carrol said, tapping the paper-cutter against her book a little impatiently. But Mrs. Vincent would not take the hint; she had not yet finished.

‘They will get hold of Dick, I suppose. There’s nothing like a worldly woman to influence a young man, and Dick is so weak.’

Mrs. Carrol did not answer; she was weary of finding excuses.

‘Let me see, she has a daughter, or a niece, or something, hasn’t she? A possible wife for Dick: how should you like that?’

‘My dear Maria, what is the good of speculating? As far as I know, matrimony is far from Dick’s thoughts, and Lady Eleanor’s niece or another would be welcome if she made Dick a good wife.’

‘I don’t suppose he *does* think of marrying. Why, it is only a few months ago, if you remember, that we heard he was in love with Evelyn Bray, the present Lady Fenchurch. It was Mrs. Twitter who told us, you know, when she came to inquire the character of a servant. She thought Evelyn Bray had behaved very badly in the matter.’

'My dear, why rake up these things? Lady Fenchurch is a young woman, and we have no right to blacken her character. Mrs. Twitter may have been mistaken.'

'Not a bit of it. I have an excellent memory. But I see you are busy, and perhaps my society is unwelcome,' she added viciously. 'I only wanted to ask you if you could spare me that little bit of chinchilla trimming you promised for dear Mary's cloak; the poor child really has not a winter wrap, and it makes me wretched to see her. If you could spare it now, and you're quite sure you won't miss it——'

Mrs. Carrol, without answering, rose and opened the door of her bedroom.

'Never mind ringing for Cox, Granny. I know where she keeps your furs, and I can easily get it without troubling any one—do you hear?—anyone.'

But Mrs. Carrol was firm; she rang for the maid, who, in high dudgeon, found and silently handed over the fur, feeling, as she expressed it, 'downright sorry that her mistress was stripping herself of everything at the bidding of that hateful Mrs. Vincent.'

'And now if that is all, Maria, I think I will go on with my letters,' quietly remarked Granny, 'lest Dick should come before I have finished.'

Mrs. Vincent, forced to content herself with this dismissal, snatched up the chinchilla, and, murmuring hurried thanks, retired to her own room to consult Mary about her mantle.

Mrs. Carrol gave a faint sigh when she was left alone, and glanced a little hopelessly round her book-shelves; the society of those near and dear to one was certainly trying; yet she felt she had much to be thankful for; and, plunging again into the consideration of her household books, she endeavoured to forget her daughter-in-law's unwelcome intrusion, and to attribute her behaviour to want of thought rather than want of heart, for was not Mrs. Vincent actuated by the most creditable mother's love? So easy is it for the pure in heart to see good in everything.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BLACK MARE.

IN due time Dick and his friend arrived at Long Leam, having driven over sixteen miles in a dog-cart. Dick greeted his grandmother most affectionately, but the welcome his aunt gave him

was tinged with exceeding frigidity. However, he bore it well, laughed and joked, inquired after his uncle, and complimented Granny on her hothouse flowers.

‘The chrysanthemums have not been quite as fine as usual,’ said Granny, flattered at his remembering her pet hobby, ‘and Smith has been rather depressed; but I really think on the whole we did as well as our neighbours.’

‘Gardens cost a dreadful quantity of money,’ said Mrs. Vincent impressively.

Granny, who fancied this an allusion to her expenditure, hastened to add, ‘I only keep up the gardens just as they were in my dear husband’s time. He wished it to be so, and the fern house I put up last year was built with my pin-money.’

‘Of course, of course, dear Granny, we all know how fond you are of your garden, and we should none of us wish you to give up anything you really liked; but I was only saying that these amusements are dreadfully expensive, and particularly now when there is so much poverty everywhere, and hundreds of people starving. You should just read the report I got from our district visitor yesterday. We live in Marylebone, you know—such a poor parish—it makes one wonder whether it is *quite* right to spend so much on one’s self——’

Granny flushed a little. Mrs. Vincent’s words seemed to accuse her of selfishness. ‘Perhaps,’ she said, a little hastily, ‘I dare say you are right, Maria; but now tell me, Dick, have you lunched?’

‘Yes, thank you, Granny; we ate some cold beef and pickles just before starting, and have scarcely got up an appetite since.’

Bruce, who, when the ceremony of presentation was over, felt himself a little isolated in the family circle, now wandered round the room examining the book-shelves. Presently he approached Mrs. Carrol, and said, ‘You have some fine old books here, I see; if you will permit me I should like to take a look at some of them to-morrow——’

‘Delighted, indeed, Mr. Bruce,’ said Mrs. Carrol, enchanted to find a sympathetic book-lover; ‘I will show you where the rarest are. We have a fine old edition of Montaigne, and some manuscripts of the sixteenth century, if you care for such things.’ She drew from her pocket the key of the bookcase, and presently Bruce and she were happily bending their heads and trying their eyes over musty folios, and discussing type and editions to their hearts’ content.

Dick stood by the window whistling low. Mrs. Vincent

approached him. 'Is it true,' she said, 'that Lady Eleanor's niece will inherit her uncle's fortune?'

'I really don't know,' answered Dick, wondering on what pretext he could make his escape.

'But what is she like—I am told she is very plain?'

'She—who? Oh, I beg your pardon, yes. I never thought about it. I suppose Miss Windermere is plain, but she is very nice.'

'That Miss Hardfast was there too, was not she? Not married yet, I suppose. Ah, well, she was a fast bold girl, and how she and her mother contrive to live on the pittance they have, I am sure I can't think—there are some queer stories afloat about them. People call them the "birds of prey," you know.'

'She is my cousin,' said Dick angrily.

'Of course, yes, in a distant way; let me see, your mother was a sister of Mr. Hardfast—that's scarcely much of a relationship—the Hardfasts were nobodies; but Mrs. Hardfast was worse than a nobody, she was a garrison belle.'

Dick was about to reply, in terms anything but complimentary, to his aunt's observations, when the door opened and Vincent Carrol entered noisily. 'Ah, Dick, my boy, delighted to see you? drove over, did you? shocking bad road, ain't it? stones all the way; doesn't matter though in a hired trap. Well, and how goes it?—you look pretty fit.' Mr. Vincent did not stop for Dick's answer, but proceeded, following his mother to the bookshelves, 'Mother, that coachman of yours is a fool; he has lamed the bay mare, and got the grey so fat he can scarcely go at all. I gave him a bit of my mind to-day; all ladies' coachmen are the same; they don't understand their business, but they know they're safe, because their mistresses are so confoundedly ignorant. Have you been round to the stables yet, Dick? No?—then you just come along with me. I have got a new pointer to show you—a beauty.'

Dick, who infinitely preferred his uncle to his aunt, the coarse selfishness of the one, being at least frank and unaffected, while the secret cunning and intrigue of the other stung like a serpent in the dark, accepted the offer gratefully, and without compunction left Bruce to entertain his grandmother.

'A very pleasant young man—exceptionally well-informed,' Granny confided at a later period to Dick; while Bruce, who knew nothing about dogs, and cared less for horseflesh, continued to explain recondite allusions and interpret Greek quotations in her favourite books, never even discovering that

Mrs. Vincent prowled round, furious at the interest Mrs. Carrol was taking in her visitor, and vainly trying to pick up intelligible scraps of the conversation in order that she might find a pretext for interrupting the fascinating *tête-à-tête*. All that afternoon Vincent and his nephew strolled about the stables and the kennel and the farm, ending with a trudge across some stubble-fields to have a look at a colt in Farmer Rogers's paddock. Vincent, who did not care who his companion was, provided he could smoke and talk about horses, made himself exceedingly agreeable to his nephew, told him he was delighted at the prospect of his election, and wasn't a bit envious, no, not he! finally confided to him his intention of buying the black mare, in order to win the Liverpool, and the difficulty that stood in the way of his carrying out this project. 'The fact is, my dear boy,' he said, staring glassily out of his codfish eyes, 'the fellow wants £800 for the mare; it's dirt cheap; she's worth it, every bit of the money, but it's a deuce of a lot, and just now with Christmas coming on, you know, and a lot of bills, I am a little pressed for money; but if I don't decide at once (I've got the refusal of the mare) she will be sold to another man who is sweet upon her; it would be a thousand pities, for she's certain to win, and—that's how it is.'

'It would be a great pity,' said Dick, thinking of something else.

'Now, my dear boy, if *you* would advance me the money, you should go halves in the profits——'

'But I haven't the money——'

'That does not signify—my mother will give it you, if you ask her; she is devoted to you, as we all know.'

'I don't think I should like to ask her; she disapproves of racing——'

'Well, don't tell her what the money's for. Say it's election business, or that you have run into debt—or something; you've got brains—you'll know what to say.'

'It is rather difficult,' muttered Dick.

'The thing is a certainty; I know there is nothing can beat that mare, and we can hedge the bet and stand several thousands to nothing.'

'I don't care so much about the money, but I should like the *kudos* of winning the Liverpool.'

'So would everybody—then it is settled; you must get the money, and I'll buy the mare and take all the trouble off your hands—it is a safe investment you will see, only trust to me.'

Dick did not quite like it. He hated telling his grandmother

a lie, and he knew she objected to racing ; on the other hand he was fired with the ambition to become a hero in the sporting world, and the thing was an excitement in itself ; besides, his uncle Vincent was a first-rate judge of horse-flesh, and not likely to make a mistake. So he parted from his uncle promising to give him the money if he could obtain it.

The month of November had been specially fine. Glorious sunsets were succeeded by bright clear mornings, and to breathe the bracing air became a pleasure. It was Mrs. Carrol's habit, whenever the weather permitted, to walk up and down the terraces and visit her hothouses every morning for an hour. Dick offered her his arm, and the good lady, counting herself fortunate to possess so attractive a grandson, spent some happy moments parading in the genial sunshine, leaning on her stalwart grandson's arm, and pointing out to him the merits of tree and shrub. It was during one of these airings that Dick propounded to her his request for £800.

'Eight hundred pounds !' she said, stopping short in her walk and looking hard at Dick, who had some ado to keep from blushing. 'It is a large sum.'

'Yes, it is,' he sheepishly confessed.

'And what are you going to do with it ?'

'Well, you see ———'

This was a difficult moment ; he could not say, 'I am going to buy a racehorse ;' and like many a better man he prevaricated, regardless of possible consequences.

'Well you see, Granny, there are a lot of expenses for this election.'

'Send me in your bill, Dick, and I will pay it.'

'Yes ; but there are trifles which cannot be included in an election bill.'

'Eight hundred pounds is scarcely a trifle !'

'No ; but college was so expensive, I have a few debts I should like to settle. Hang it, Granny, I want the money, and I must have it ; please don't ask me any more questions.'

The old lady took her grandson's arm again and proceeded a little way in silence.

'Dick,' she said at last, 'I trust you—if you require this money you shall have it ; only be careful, dear ; I am not *very* well able to spend just now, and perhaps the garden is expensive, and I ought to retrench ; you know that I wish to do all that is right towards you—you are my heir, this place will be yours.' She waved her hand towards the terrace and the old yew hedges and the mere. 'I wish to leave you everything in-

tact ; it is a fine property, Dick, a fine property, but we must not be extravagant.'

'You are very kind, Granny.'

Dick's head sank a little ; he pushed with his stick at some weeds in the path.

'I should like to put by something, Dick, first for your uncle—he is not rich and has a large family, and then for you—you will marry a wife some day, and she will be young and gay, and find this house old-fashioned, and wish for new furniture and pretty things.'

'Long Leam is beautiful ; we shall be quite satisfied,' Dick said deprecatingly.

'Yes, my dear, Long Leam *is* beautiful, and it suits an old woman like me ; it reminds me of my girlhood, and I prefer to see everything about me that has grown old with me ; but young people are different—she will want low arm-chairs and feather screens, and frippery and new carpets, and all that. You shall give them to her, Dick ; but I must save the money for it, and so please do not mind if I say we must not be extravagant.'

She smiled one of the gentle spiritual smiles, which made you think her soul was already in heaven, and that the earthly smile was only the reflection of divine glory, and Dick hung his head lower, shamed by her goodness, speechless in his confusion.

'But you shall have the money, dear ; I was going to do up the conservatory, and get some new vines, and have some fresh hot-water pipes put in, but all that can wait, and if you will come to my room presently I will give you the cheque.'

Dick did not answer, but he took the dear old lady's hand with its mittens, and the quaint antique filigree gold rings set in garnets and emeralds on her fingers, and, lifting it to his lips, kissed it reverently. Here, at least, was true nobility, a heart that gave lavishly, generously, and exacted nothing in return. Nothing ? Why, it extorted respect, and gained love—the bargain was surely a fair one.

When Dick handed over the cheque to his uncle, he could not help saying, with a gravity somewhat foreign to his nature :

'You are quite sure we are making a good purchase?—you know I couldn't bear Granny's money to be wasted.'

'Wasted ! bless you, there isn't a chance of it ; why the money is as safe as in the funds. I'll go this very day and close the sale, and telegraph to Tommy Lightheart that he is

to ride her. With such a mare, and such a jockey, we are as safe as a church.'

Long Leam was as dull as ever, but Dick was so attentive to his grandmother, and so anxious to shoot her coverts as she wished, and to be civil to the neighbours she invited to make up the number of the guns, and so ready to carry her knitting, or put on her shawl, or convey her orders to the gardener, that he had not time to think of being bored. In the evening, he and Bruce held endless smoking parliaments in Dick's room (which being at the end of a long passage, and shut off by a baize door, he was permitted to pollute with tobacco), and settled the affairs of the nation; but though Dick discoursed freely on politics and pleasure he carefully, as by some special instinct, refrained from mentioning his purchase of the black mare, or his hopes of winning the Liverpool; and if by chance his uncle began the subject of racing in Bruce's presence he would turn the conversation and say:

'You know, uncle, Julian is not a sporting character, so all this talk is only Greek to him; get him upon politics, and see if he doesn't find something interesting to tell us.'

Thus even Bruce, his *Fidus Achates*, did not know the deepest depths of Dick's soul, nor suspect what a multitude of various interests occupied his mind.

CHAPTER XIII.

LUCE IS COY.

THE black mare was bought and the jockey duly engaged, and all promised well for the success of Mr. Vincent's project. Unfortunately the public had also got wind of the mare's excellence, so that the price he was able to obtain about her was not nearly so advantageous as he had hoped; still this served but to confirm his good opinion of the purchase, and he comforted himself with the thought that a little later on they would be able to hedge their money. But Dick could not dally for ever by an old lady's chair; the election agent clamoured for his return, and Mr. Highview claimed his promise of another visit. So after a few days he took a tender farewell of his grandmother; his heart smote him and he kissed her more fondly than usual; and, leaving Mr. and Mrs. Vincent to bear her company, returned to Highview Castle. Most of the company had departed, and only Maud Hardfast, who, having

lost Arthur Sterney, was sadly at a loss for amusement, remained behind to welcome him. The most constant of men weary of overmuch affection ; and Dick, who was used to Maud's beauty, and began to see through some of her artifices (especially since she had played him off against Arthur Sterney), found her attentions somewhat overpowering. As his aunt Vincent once truly observed, after all Maud was scarcely a relation, and to be seen constantly in her presence, and eternally hanging over and monopolized by her, might lead to complications. He had not the smallest intention of marrying her ; he was not even in love with her. She possessed no money, and a good many doubtful relations ; and to undertake the responsibility of matrimony was far enough from his thoughts. But he was perfectly aware of the power of gossip, and he decided that it would be advisable to display interest in some one else in order to disarm suspicion. For this purpose Luce presented herself most opportunely. She was plain and unassuming, and no one could suppose her to be attractive to a gay young man, so that his attentions could only be interpreted to mean civility. Thus it happened that Dick found himself often by Luce's side, that he took her into dinner whenever he had a chance, and that he would turn over the leaves of her music-book, or wind a skein of worsted for her if she desired it. Lady Eleanor watched these indications of a rising attachment with pleasure, but Maud turned sick with annoyance, and almost fell ill from worry.

'You little sly minx !' she said, attacking Luce one day in the corridor. 'How dared you say you didn't care to speak to Mr. Carrol, and that you would do your best to help me, when you know you're always with him now, and scarcely let me get a word in edgeways. I hate girls who are humbugs and hypocrites, and you did pretend to be superior to love and marriage.'

'So I am,' said Luce quietly. 'Mr. Carrol does not love me, but if he pleases to talk to me a little, and I find his company agreeable, I don't see why I should not permit it. He will not marry you the sooner because he does not talk to me.'

'Of course he will. You're trying to spoil my plans, you know you are—you nasty venomous little reptile.'

'Don't be angry, Maud ; I can't help it. I don't know what is the reason, but I am sure Mr. Carrol avoids you.'

'And if it is so, I know the reason : your own flirtation (and really for a new hand you're not at all bad) is the cause of it. I did not think you could be so mean, so ungenerous.'

Here Maud pulled out her pocket-handkerchief and pretended to cry—perhaps she really did shed a few tears—for wounded vanity suffers nearly as much as love.

‘Dear Maud !’ Luce put her arms round her neck and kissed her affectionately, ‘don’t cry. I promise not to speak to Mr. Carrol to-day, at least not if I can help it.’

‘Mind, now, you remember your promise.’ Maud put away her handkerchief and smiled again graciously. ‘Remember—not one word.’

‘I said if I could help it,’ added Luce, as she passed quickly on. She had given the promise in a fit of generosity, but Mr. Carrol’s own action might absolve her. If he sought her out, if he came and sat by her as usual, she could not turn her back or be uncivil. No ; in that case she *must* speak to him. In all honesty, however, she tried to render this less likely. Dick had been away all day canvassing, and he only returned in time for dinner. His place was next Lady Eleanor, and Luce at the other end of the table had no chance of sharing in their conversation. After dinner she chose a position between Mrs. Hardfast’s portly person and a large table, on which were scattered books of photographs of Florence and Rome. One of these she seized, and made a pretence of being deeply absorbed. When the gentlemen came in she would not look up—for aught she knew there might be magnetism in her eye—but kept her head carefully bent over the photographs.

Some moments of breathless waiting elapsed before she heard a voice at her elbow say, ‘What is engrossing you so to-night ?’

Her heart leapt. He had found her out. He had come to her without any finessing or assistance on her part. She was absolved from her promise, and he liked to talk to her.

These varied emotions lent a sparkle to her eye and a colour to her cheek. ‘She is really not so *very* plain,’ thought Dick, as he drew a chair near and sat down.

‘I can’t talk to you with that great table between us. I never knew you were so fond of photographs before.’

‘I am not particularly fond of photographs.’

‘Then why are you looking at them ?’

‘That is my secret,’ said Luce, with a smile.

‘I think you mean mischief. Do come away from behind the table and let us sit on that sofa ; it will be ever so much more comfortable.’

‘You shouldn’t talk to me,’ said poor Luce abruptly. She understood nothing whatever of diplomacy, or she would have

managed better. 'Why don't you talk to Maud? She is sitting all alone, and has not even any photographs to look at.'

'So she is,' said Dick quietly, stretching himself more comfortably; 'sitting all alone. Well, that must make quite a pleasant variety for her; she is generally surrounded by all the men in the room.'

'And she only cares for one.'

'Do you mean me to be fatuous, and apply your observation?'

'If you like.'

'Then I will not. I am sorry to disappoint any young lady, but Maud must sit alone to-night.'

'It is hard upon her,' gently urged Luce.

'Why hard? She is nothing to me.'

'No! I thought——'

'Whatever you thought forget, please, from this moment. Maud is my cousin, a very pretty, nice, lively girl, but nothing more, and never will be.'

'Are you sure?'

'Perfectly sure. You are the last person who ought to doubt me.'

'Why?'

'Why, because for the last day or two I have devoted my time chiefly to you.'

Luce coloured painfully. She understood. He could talk to her because she did not count, it could not signify. Her expressive face told a tale. He saw he had wounded her.

'What is it? What have I said, Miss Windermere?'

'Nothing, Mr. Carrol—nothing, at least, that I mind.'

'But I must have done wrong. I am sure I am very sorry.'

'See, my aunt is making me a sign; we are going to have some music.'

Luce rose hastily and threaded her way quickly across the room.

Dick sat on, sulky and alone, refusing to stir. What a perverse world it was, to be sure; if a man felt himself comfortable in a girl's presence, ten to one something happened to separate them. No, indeed, Luce was certainly not plain; she had fine eyes and the prettiest way of looking interested in all you said, which was not without charm, and she never wanted to talk about herself, or to be paid compliments. Presently Dick, bored with the music, and determined to avoid Maud, slunk out of the room and retired to enjoy a lonely pipe. Luce

missed him, and sang badly in consequence. What was the matter? Had she offended him? She said to herself that no promises, no feeling of loyalty, should tempt her to be cold to him to-morrow. Maud must be mistaken; he would never marry her. That evening Luce, sitting in her bedroom, her brown hair streaming over her shoulders, and two big serious eyes staring at her own reflection in the looking-glass, had an air of extreme youthfulness that became her exceedingly. So thought even Lady Eleanor, who just then walked in. Luce started.

‘What are you doing there, child? How late you are sitting up! Has Devon left you?’

‘Oh yes, aunt,’ said Luce, hastily twisting up her hair; ‘I shall be ready directly. I was only——’

‘Only wool-gathering, as usual,’ observed Lady Eleanor, seating herself on the edge of the bed; ‘when will you give up that bad habit? However, I must say I think you are improved; you are more sociable, and seem to get on nicely with Mr. Carrol. What has he said to you?’

‘We spoke of the election, and he told me about his grandmother——’

‘Rubbish! I mean has he said—well, anything really marked?’

‘No, aunt, he has said nothing—he means nothing; he prefers Maud to me. Oh, why can one *never* speak to a man without some hateful after-thought of intentions spoiling all?’

‘Luce, my dear, you forget yourself,’ said Lady Eleanor severely; ‘and as to Maud Hardfast, if I thought her presence interfered with your prospects I should turn her out of the house to-morrow.’

‘No, she does not interfere,’ said poor Luce incoherently, anxious to avert her aunt’s wrath from Maud; ‘but the fact is, there is nothing at all to speak about.’

‘Then there *ought* to be. Mr. Carrol is a very eligible person; he has seemed to take an interest in you, has shared your rides, and apparently enjoys the same tastes; under these circumstances, unless a girl is a fool, she ought to know whether a man means anything.’

‘But he does not. Oh, aunt, do not say such things!’

One glance at Luce’s distressed countenance impressed Lady Eleanor with the truth of this statement. She relaxed her severity a little, and rose majestically.

‘Luce, I believe,’ she said, as she neared the door, ‘I do believe you have your fate in your own hands; let me beg of

you not to throw it away recklessly, or, from any foolish scruples about other silly girls, render yourself distasteful to the man who may possibly offer you a happy home and true affection.'

Lady Eleanor usually talked a great deal about true affection and the domesticities ; she did not practise them much herself, but the words sounded well, and imposed upon her hearers. When Lady Eleanor's stately footsteps ceased to echo down the passage, and Luce once more felt certain she was alone, she quickly put out her candle and threw herself down by the bedside in her white dressing-gown ; and then in the darkness and the silence she let her tears flow quietly and her heart breathe out its secret. 'For I *do* love him,' she whispered to the solitude of night. 'I *do* love him ; he will never love me ; he is nothing to me, he is so handsome, and so clever, and so happy, but still I love him ;' and the little figure crouched on thus in the dark and the loneliness, and the unsatisfied love with which her gentle soul was overflowing vented itself in sobs and sighs. Lady Eleanor had trampled cruelly on her most cherished feelings : but then Lady Eleanor did not know—the affection and domesticities of which she spoke comprised none of the keen and exquisite agony which Luce experienced. Luce, who—proud, reserved, foolish little creature—had given the devotion of her heart to a man who had scarce passed three weeks in her company. It was illogical, it was unlikely, it was far from reasonable, and yet Luce could not help it. In her lonely childhood and her stunted girlhood, she had accumulated a volume of feeling, which now spent itself on so ordinary a personage as young Dick Carrol. For when we love we do not account the object so much as our own capacity for loving. Love works miracles ; it makes the plain girls pretty, the dull men bright ; it transports the elastic soul into regions of light and liberty, where it can roam freely, and irradiate the very commonplaces of life with the ardent lava-stream that consumes it. To love all things are possible, for everything is a miracle. Luce loved, and in her madness reckoned herself the most fortunate of mortals.

CHAPTER XIV.

JULIAN FINDS AN AGREEABLE GIRL.

FOR some days subsequently Luce was very still and silent, her eyes were red-rimmed, and her sad appearance attracted Lady Eleanor's notice, drawing down upon her a torrent of re-

proaches. It also attracted Maud's attention, but it drew no reproaches from her.

'Poor Luce!' she would say caressingly, 'why do you vex yourself? All men are the same; it is here to-day and there to-morrow, with them; they were not created for constancy, and it is useless to expect it of them.'

'I expect nothing,' Luce answered indifferently.

'Oh, yes, you do. You expect a great deal more than I have ever asked of men. You give yourself no trouble, you take no pains to be pleasant, in fact you rather avoid them; you would not even be content with an offer of marriage, but you want love.'

'Yes. I want love,' said Luce.

'I declare you are quite indelicate; love is not in fashion; there are of course such things as passion and madness; we hear of them in poetry and on the stage; but who, in the name of goodness, wants love in ordinary life? Why, it would be quite out of place, like soup at breakfast. You are so unpractical.'

'Have not all the best things in life been done by unpractical people? All the reforms, all the inventions, all the literature—the authors of such things were always called unpractical because they lived on a higher, a heroic plane of life.'

'Well, we are not inventors, and I'm sure I don't wish to be heroic. We are only two commonplace girls, and our business is to do the best we can for ourselves. For my part, if Dick sheers off now I shall marry Arthur Sterney, debts and duns and all, and try if I can't keep him in order.' Therewith she danced off to a mirror, posed herself, ruffled up her golden fringe a bit, humming a valse tune to herself as she did so, and finally returned to where Luce sat, book in hand, by the fire.

'Seriously, Luce, what are you aiming at?'

'I have already told you—at nothing. Why should one always have some scheme on hand?'

'Why? because it's human nature. Mamma always schemed, and I've inherited the faculty. Ever since I can remember I have always played a part. When I was a little girl, and came down to the drawing-room in short frocks and pink ribbons, mamma used to say to me, "Now mind, Maud, you behave nicely, and look pretty, or I don't know what so-and-so will think of you." I have gone on behaving nicely and looking pretty ever since.'

'It must be very fatiguing.'

'Not a bit; habit is second nature.'

‘A very unpleasant second nature, I should think. Shall you give up scheming when you are married?’

‘Certainly not. I shall want other things then ; it is only the stupid sheep-like women who sit down patiently and ask for nothing. You’re one of those ruminating creatures, Luce, and will never get your own way in anything.’

This was precisely what Luce said to herself. She chid herself for foolish fancies and happy day-dreams. She repeated to herself over and over again that she was plain, and that nobody could love her ; that Dick only amused himself with her from *désœuvrement*, and that he would soon go away, and she would probably never see him again. And yet, though she sought by every means in her power to wrap herself in a mantle of chilly stoicism, she could not help it that his voice brought the blood into her cheeks, nor that his step set her heart beating. No one could say that Dick’s notice of her was anything but friendly and undemonstrative, and just what was fitting to be paid to the adopted daughter of his host, and yet Luce felt that their intercourse was on a different footing from ordinary acquaintance. Dick talked to her as to a trusted friend ; as to one in whose presence he need not be constrained, and one who asked truth rather than pretty speeches. He knew she was neither mercenary or intriguing, and the sense of rest conveyed to him in this conviction served to render the companionship doubly agreeable to a man who had never known the frank and loving comradeship of a sister. He found himself telling her things that he had breathed to no living soul except Bruce ; asking her advice, speaking of his thoughts, his wishes, his illusions. She knew all about his grandmother, and the teasing reproaches of his aunt Vincent, and the Gargantuan propensities of his uncle Vincent ; she knew the names of his dogs, how many rats Vic could kill, and the prizes Gip took, and the age of the old hunter who had carried him so well at college, and the history of the pictures and the prints at Long Leam. And Luce was never tired of listening. Accustomed to the gaudy and lavish splendour of Highview Castle, the description of Granny, with her old-fashioned gentle ways, her white-haired retainers, and her clockwork establishment, charmed her fancy and interested her imagination.

‘You must let me see your granny,’ she said one day impulsively. ‘I have never known of anyone resembling her. She is like an old *châtelaine* in a fairy tale.’

‘She is just like one,’ Dick answered, ‘and I love her dearly, kind old thing ; but you would perhaps find her antiquated.’

‘Not I ; my aunt might, but I like what is old. Things are too new to please me here,’ she answered decidedly.

Dick, who in his heart of hearts was proud of the fine old lady, smiled, and promised to arrange an interview between them. These conversations usually took place in the evening, for Dick’s electioneering business took up most of his time ; and thanks to Mr. Highview’s matter-of-fact energy and Bruce’s enthusiasm he was never allowed to grow slack for an instant. Dick was beginning to take a real interest in politics. Under such able tuition as that of his friend Bruce this was not surprising, for his political views tinged every thought of Bruce’s mind.

‘If politics do not mean everything to a man,’ the latter would say, ‘they must mean nothing ; for politics rightly considered comprise every question of social and moral importance. The family is a part of the state, and the state includes the general well-being of humanity. If the motive power of parties be self-interest, the decadence of a nation cannot be far off, and is a mere matter of time ; therefore, purity of election, universal suffrage, and worthy candidates are the three chief ends to be desired. When you have educated the masses and given them freedom of citizenship, you are likely to arrive at some consensus which will represent the broadest and fairest level of thought.’

Dick could not go quite so far as this ; he, like Mr. Highview, preferred to wait and let wants shape themselves rather than dictate what form they should take. He believed in a doctrine of atoms, that affinity would attract and crystallize into the most suitable forms. He thought things tolerably satisfactory as they were, and, that unless distinct pressure were brought to bear upon the prejudices and customs of society, it was unnecessary to excite class feeling and party spite. He wished to do what was right, but, as he did not see his way clearly to what *was* right, he preferred a passive and doubtful attitude. The variety of problems that presented themselves, their various discordant elements, the contradictions that arrested his footsteps and troubled his mind, all puzzled while they interested him. He had no idea that to be a Member of Parliament implied such responsibilities, such a perpetual making up one’s mind, such constant and seemingly important decisions. He began to be afraid that he should be a useless member of the House, and felt helpless and irresolute. Hitherto he had supposed that to take one’s place creditably in Parliamentary life it needed only good health, stentorian lungs, a habit of sitting

up late, and an announcement which placarded one amongst one's friends as a Liberal or a Tory. Now, he found that honesty was not always expediency, and that if you agreed to one proposition it did not follow as a corollary that you agreed to a dozen others. Occasionally he felt himself drawn towards a Conservative creed, especially if the question touched upon personal matters, such as payment of rents, or landlord's privileges, or the game-laws; at other times he boldly espoused Radical principles, and accused the Tories of blindness, stupidity, and retrograde opinions.

'Now you see, my dear boy,' Mr. Highview dinned into his ears, 'you can't work on independent lines: it don't pay; first belong to a party, then stick to it. You'll find it the only advisable thing in the long run. Never make yourself peculiar, for then every one is your enemy; but do as others—abide by a commonplace standard, and you'll find all men your friends. Eccentricity implies superiority, at least in your own mind, and superiority rubs up everyone's back. A man can afford to forgive; he cannot bear to envy. Your friend Bruce, though he is very clever, and I am sure a most well-meaning person, is an enthusiast, and will never be successful. Success in life means ordinary capacities, with an extraordinary power of using them. Now, Bruce theorizes splendidly, but in practice his scruples will always impede any real progress. He will never trample on the weak, and to do much good you must be capable of doing a little evil.'

Between such contradictory exhortations Dick performed his canvassing, and attained at last to a very fair measure of the golden mean. He promised easily enough, knowing that it was not in his power to perform, but judging that hope is a great factor in happiness; he listened to grievances *cum grano*, and felt that there was a great deal to be said on both sides. He raged against his opponents, comforting his conscience by the knowledge that they raged against him, and he thus secured a hearty following and appreciative audiences. Sir Hilary Fenchurch, on his part, had wasted no time; he was of a good old stock, a sportsman, a generous landlord, and a tried man of business. Lady Fenchurch's fair face, though she said little and only smiled sweetly, had been of considerable assistance in his visits to farmers' wives, who were supposed to influence their husbands; and he spoke in a fluent, careful fashion, with a sense of conviction and a mode of placing further appeal out of the question that carried away his hearers. The fight promised to be a close one. Every nerve was strained by

rival agents ; every argument used by the respective candidates. The instant one announced a full and enthusiastic meeting, the other followed suit by holding a monster gathering of the electors ; did one hoist a squib or a cartoon, the other immediately invented something more sharp and stinging.

Hitherto, however, these attacks, though rude and personal, had attained but little importance, for Sir Hilary was a gentleman above reproach, and Dick was a young and untried man. It was hard to get hold of truth or satire that would really wound and rankle in them. Dick began to feel happy ; the sense of power gratified him, and existence at Highview was the most luxurious possible. Not a trifling or a fashionable caprice but could there be immediately gratified ; the hothouses were regal, whenever he wished it, a gardenia adorned his buttonhole, while mountains of pines and grapes made his appearance every day at dessert ; horses and carriages existed in profusion, and even a quiet library was set apart for Bruce's good pleasure. To the latter the place seemed a kind of Capua, whose charms would entice the strongest ; each day he declared he must really return to his work and his London lodging, and each day Dick prevailed upon him to grant further delay.

Julian consented easily enough, for when he was not engaged canvassing no one troubled their head about him, and he was as much buried among his books as in his own home. Towards dusk he might be met, a tall figure in flap hat and grey overcoat, striding along with head bent down and hands clasped behind his back. Asked what he had seen when on one of these rapid pedestrian tours he would answer, 'Nothing.' How nothing ? Then Julian confessed that he believed it was a cold day or a bright day, but that really he could not be sure, nor remember where he had walked (he usually took the same constitutional, two miles out and two miles in along the turn-pike road), for he had been busy running over in his mind some arguments in favour of socialism or grappling with an abstruse question of feudal law. Once Luce took him out for a walk ; she showed him her favourite flowers, and pointed out some lovely tints of the late autumnal foliage, and the effect of chequered gleams of sunshine under the avenue trees. He opened his mild eyes, and looked where he was desired, and said it 'was very pretty, indeed quite remarkable, an optic illusion, he supposed,' until Luce burst out laughing, and, seeing his meditative gaze fixed upon her face, said :

'I suppose you don't know the difference between a woman

and the Elgin marbles, or the muddy London streets and a cowslip meadow, Mr. Bruce, if you always wander about with your eyes shut.'

'Excuse me, Miss Windermere, I am afraid I have been rude ; but the fact is I have never yet had time to observe the beauties of nature, and Greek manuscripts have injured my sight. When I was at Cambridge I only walked from necessity, and generally with a book in my hand ; some day when I have leisure I must do a course of sunsets.'

'And sunrises ; it will be so good for your health.'

Bruce considered Luce a very agreeable young lady, a fact which he gave her to understand in some clumsy Homeric fashion ; nineteenth-century young ladies not having yet come within the orbit of his vision, and his mother, a prim becaped widow, being the latest manifestation of womanhood to which he had bent his attention. Yet, as has been said, he owned a kind of distant ideal cult for women, and in his heart treasured the notion that some day, when he had leisure, he should taste love ; but the period at which he would allow himself such an epicurean excess was hid in a far-off distant future. Meanwhile, he was content with books. Lady Eleanor honestly despised him ; he was not a man, but a mole, she declared ; and, as for being young and a contemporary of Dick's, she believed him rather to be a dug-up centenarian, a kind of resuscitated toad-in-the-hole. She tolerated him on Dick's account and because he was quiet and inoffensive, but declined taking any trouble about him or casting him a thought, except when she saw a mark of muddy boots on the carpet, or discovered a trace of cigar-ash on the library table-cloth, and his presence obtruded itself on her mind. Maud had at first set her cap at him, as she did at all men, but finding that he never looked at her, and only responded to her advances by a few precise speeches, she soon gave him up as ineligible, and he was left to solitude and the tender mercies of kind-hearted Luce, who liked him for many reasons. First, because he was shy and quiet ; next, because he was poor and unpopular ; and thirdly, because he was Dick's friend—the latter the most potent reason of all. The days slipped by, and Christmas was approaching. Dick intended to spend it at his grandmother's, and Bruce among his books in London. The moment of parting, to which Luce looked forward with silent terror, rapidly approached. Dick was kind and friendly and cool as usual ; he had not said one word that would lead her to think he cared for her, but he had promised her an invitation to Long Leam, and on that anti-

pation she now lived. The day before his departure was wild and snowy. 'Seasonable weather,' as some stout elderly people are fond of remarking; 'shrivelling weather,' as Luce said, who was of a chilly constitution. Dick had returned, cold and miserable, from a drive in the dog-cart, along the slippery snow-covered roads, and was gone to his room to change his wet clothes. Maud in the billiard-room practised difficult strokes by herself; Lady Eleanor and Mrs. Hardfast were closeted in the latter's *boudoir*, and the morning-room was empty, save for Luce, who, curled up by the fire, sat gazing into the red embers. The last month had been the happiest of her life, and now it was over, gone like everything else, a mere shred of time, ragged and unfinished. Nature, heedless in her impassive calm, leaves much unfinished work, patches here, and rents there, and hearts torn asunder, and loves parted, and hopes raised but to be dashed to pieces. What becomes of all the unfinished lives, of those who have missed their meaning, of those who die young, standing crowned with flowers, gay and confident on the threshold of existence, of the mother-love rudely snapped with the frail baby's wasting breath, of the genius whose unfolded wings, soaring to heaven, wax feeble and sink into the jaws of death, of the songs unsung, and the loves unloved, and all the mystery and pain of earth? Are they lived again, or does the book close at the turned-down page, just as the interest is most keen, the picture most vivid?

Luce sat and wondered. Presently the door opened and Bruce stole in, absent, gentle, noiseless as usual.

'I am alone,' said Luce, in a low voice, from the fireplace; 'I don't know where all the others have gone to.'

'What a bright fire!' said Bruce, warming his thin white hands at the blaze. 'The fire-worshippers were not far wrong, for warmth is the medicine, if not the source, of life, and the best gift of the gods.'

'Yes, I feel that too in the sunshine, how glorious it is! Sometimes the mere exhilaration it gives becomes pleasure.'

'You are sensitive,' said Bruce, seating himself; 'that is a dangerous temperament.'

'We cannot help our temperament, can we?' asked Luce, with a tiny laugh. 'Don't you think the paper on the nursery walls, or the songs with which our nurses hush us to sleep, are answerable for a good deal?'

'No doubt. Early association is far more important than

anyone supposes, but the philosophical mind endeavours to rise superior to temperament.'

'Women are not superior beings, so I suppose that does not apply to us,' she said.

'In some measure of course it does. We are all free beings.'

'Are we? I often doubt it. Who is free? You are, perhaps, and Mr. Carrol, but I am not free.'

'You can preserve your own individuality. That is every one's duty.'

'I suppose it is,' Luce sighed.

'Of course we are influenced because we are human beings, but so long as we do not merge our *ego* we are safe.'

'Do you call being in love merging one's individuality?' asked Luce, shading her eyes from the fire, which vividly lighted up Bruce's long earnest face.

'No, for love is right and natural; we love the good qualities of another, we need not adopt his bad ones; we have strength to see where the right course lies, and to pursue our better judgment, even though we love.'

'I think if I loved I should be weak.'

'I am sure you would not, for you have a great deal of character. That yielding up one's convictions is weakness, not love. All this applies to friendship as well, for where there is no respect there can be no friendship.'

'You respect Mr. Carrol,' she asked.

'Of course, or he would not be my friend.'

'You are a stoic, Mr. Bruce; I could never be so strong as that.'

Julian smiled.

'I think I set a right value on friendship, that is all. I could not lie, or steal, or cheat, to oblige my dearest friend.'

'But you would stand by him, even if he did some of these things?'

'I really cannot tell, I don't think so; but I trust my friends are not of that sort.'

'Mr. Carrol is not.'

'No, he is a real good fellow. There is plenty of stuff in him, you will see; it is sure to come out some day. I only hope he will marry well, for he is very susceptible to female influence.'

'Yes, of course, we must hope he will marry well.' As Luce, the serious circumspect air sitting quaintly on her young face, said these words with the gravity of an elderly matron discuss-

ing the prospects of her child, she had no idea of herself as a possible wife for Dick, nor did she for an instant suppose that Bruce meant anything by his remarks. These two were so unworldly that they could meet serenely on their own level, a level different to that of poor average humanity, though perhaps, to some, such absence of guilelessness might have seemed the level of folly.

‘Marriage will be the making of him,’ repeated Bruce, slowly rubbing his hands, ‘and he is worth a good woman’s love.’

Luce said nothing; she enjoyed the quiet and the luxurious sense of ease and warmth, as she listened to the praises of the man she loved, doled out in Bruce’s slow measured tones. The slowness of the tones seemed to give greater weight to the praises. The candles had not yet been brought in; shadows fell around, and a sense of darkness and mystery haunted the furthest corners of the room; but in the cosy ~~in~~^{under} the recessed marble chimney-piece, rosy with the leaping reflections of the firelight, it was warm and bright and cheerful. Dick found them thus when, a few moments later, dry and reclothed, he entered the room. ‘What, sitting in the dark?’ he said in his bright manly voice.

‘The twilight is so pleasant,’ urged Luce, in extenuation of her idleness.

‘And for a wonder you are not reading, Julian.’

‘No. Miss Windermere has entertained me agreeably.’

‘That is a great compliment for *you*,’ said Dick, turning to Luce; ‘the most beautiful woman in creation would not keep him a moment, if she were not agreeable, and could not talk.’

Luce blushed a little, but in the dim, rosy glow her blush was not observed.

‘I have a letter from Granny,’ continued Dick, ‘and she tells me she has written to your uncle and aunt, asking them to come with you and spend Christmas at Long Leam, or to spare you if they cannot leave home themselves.’

‘How delightful! I do hope it can be managed.’

‘It must be managed. Use all your diplomacy, Miss Luce, for I *want* you to come.’

‘I shall try my very best. How kind of Mrs. Carrol to ask me.’

‘I have told her so much. She is interested in you, and she likes young people.’

‘And I shall *love* her, I am sure!’ cried Luce, springing up with sudden energy as the footman entered, bearing the lamps.

CHAPTER XV

MRS. VINCENT IS ANNOYED.

LADY ELEANOR sent a civil excuse for herself to Mrs. Carrol, but Mr. Highview and his niece eagerly accepted the invitation. He remained the appointed time, at the end of which Mrs. Carrol begged him to confide Luce to her charge, and the girl, with anxious appeal in her eyes, pleaded hard for permission. Lady Eleanor, whom her husband consulted by telegram, graciously gave consent, and thus Luce became one of the family party at Long Leam. On her arrival Mrs. Carrol greeted her with outstretched hands and a cordial kiss, showed her into a bright little nest of chintz and white panelled walls, told her to make herself at home, and that she was glad to see her. The old lady's manner was so simple and so genuine that Luce, who usually fled from strangers, was attracted at once.

'Would you like your tea here?' said the old lady, lighting two more candles on the dressing-table, 'or will you come downstairs? Do just as you like.'

'I should like to come down,' said Luce, to whom kind consideration for her individual fancies was an unknown luxury. At dinner she sat next Dick, who was in unusually high spirits, and entertained her with a number of funny anecdotes about his dogs. And afterwards she sang to Mrs. Carrol, in the large, dimly lighted drawing-room. Luce had a pretty little voice, with a note of feeling and acute sensitiveness in it, that occasionally proved unmanageable in the cold decorum of post-prandial singing, but, alone with old Mrs. Carrol (Mrs. Vincent having retired to look after some of her numerous brood of children), she sang unconcernedly to her heart's content; sweet simple *volkslieder*, of which her German governess had taught her at least a score, or old English ballads with a sad unfinished refrain. Mrs. Carrol dropped her knitting as the girl's voice sounded clear and pathetic, the high notes a little *voilées* through the spacious chamber; she bent her head, and old-world dreams came to her. She saw herself again a merry girl in short-waisted muslin gown, her hair crowned by a large straw hat, and a circle of beaux round her whispering their prim and ceremonious addresses. How long ago it seemed, how very long, and yet her heart still felt quite young and fresh.

'Do you like that, Mrs. Carrol?' Luce's young voice asked from the piano.

'Ah, my dear, come here.' The girl approached, and, drawing a footstool near, sat at the old lady's feet.

'Give me your hand ; you have caused me so much pleasure.' She wiped away a tear with her thin cambric handkerchief as she said this. 'You made me young again. Where did you learn that way of touching people? My granddaughters sing, but they do not make me cry. See, I am quite a silly old woman.'

Luce drew down the slim and somewhat shrunken white hand, on which the antique diamonds and amethysts glittered brightly, and kissed it.

'I am so glad !' she gently sighed.

'It is good of you to amuse an old woman like me,' said Granny.

'It was good of you to let me come.'

'But we are dull people here,' said Granny, looking very closely into Luce's face.

'I do not find it dull.'

'What, not away from your own home, your aunt, all your pleasures?'

'My aunt does not care for my society.'

'But she loves you?'

'I don't know. Yes, I suppose she does,' said Luce, burying her face in Mrs. Carrol's pale lilac brocade.

'I love you, child,' said Granny gently. And then the two women, the old one and the young one, kissed each other silently ; and Luce felt that love had come into her life. This love at least would never disappoint her ; it was so different from the violent friendships, their briefness measured by their violence, she had seen in the world of fashion ; and then, Luce reflected with infinite pleasure, they would at least have one surpassing interest in common—Dick's welfare. For Luce, once admitted into the grandmother's heart, became a sharer of her hopes and fears—planned, thought, and worked for Dick as Granny did. She could talk of him to her heart's content, for Granny loved him better than anything else in the world, and was never tired of discussing his affairs. She spoke seldom of her late husband or of her eldest son ; all the concentrated love of years seemed poured out upon this young man, who, though neither his grandmother nor Luce confessed it, was but a very ordinary piece of humanity after all.

'When Dick is in Parliament he must marry,' planned the grandmother.

'Oh, yes,' echoed Luce ; 'a good wife will be the making of him. And then he is worthy of a good woman's love,' she added, remembering the words of his friend Bruce.

'I am so afraid of the present young ladies—I don't mind telling you this Luce, because you are not a bit like them—but I dread his bringing home a fine fashionable woman who would sneer at everything and make him miserable, for he has right feeling, the dear boy.'

Then Luce, thinking of Maud, agreed. How terribly worldly cynicism coming from such rosy lips would seem to simple Granny. And one day when Luce had been singing her best, Granny took both her hands, and holding her at arm's length, after a prolonged look at her irregular features and the soft intelligent eyes, said: 'My dear, I wish Dick would ask *you* to be his wife.'

'Oh, dear Mrs. Carrol, don't say such things; indeed, indeed, I am not good enough. I am so plain, you know.'

'I don't think you plain, child; your eyes are wonderful, and you have such a sweet voice; and, somehow, I am sure when you love you will love rightly, for remember, Luce, marriage without love is *miser*y.'

Luce bowed her head, and went to her room with a slow and chastened step.

Love—yes, indeed, she could love well, there need be no fear of that: she had not squandered her treasure and cast it haphazard right and left upon the waters; it was all there, pure and priceless, waiting to be thrown into the lap of him she loved. She would never change, she was sure of that, she had been starved too long; her hunger once appeased, it would be for ever. And then she said to herself that her hopes were always dashed, and that the ideal never became reality, and that she must drive such thoughts from her mind.

Mrs. Vincent observed Granny's infatuation for Luce with increasing displeasure.

Luce mistrusted her, and involuntarily showed it; but Mrs. Vincent was more than a match for her, and determined upon the expulsion of the intruder.

'The little minx! what does she mean by coming here and making up to Granny in that disgusting way?' she remarked on one occasion to her husband.

'She will have money some day, I expect,' stolidly said Vincent, who just now felt considerable embarrassment from the want of some ready cash, and meditated asking Dick to lend him a little; 'it would not be half a bad thing for Dick.'

'Dick!' almost screamed Mrs. Vincent. 'Is everything to be for him then. I wonder you are not ashamed of the way

you try, on all occasions, to take the bread out of your children's mouths.'

'Well, they are not likely to marry Miss Luce, at any rate; Watty is only just gone to college, and you know he is awkward and has red hair, and Tom is at school. I don't think she would look at either of *them*.'

'That's right, abuse your family; I am accustomed to it. But what I *do* know is, that that girl, with her pale face and her quiet ways, is a schemer. I have noticed her carefully. Why need she be always picking up the stitches in Granny's knitting, and singing those mawkish songs to her, and cooing over her like a hoarse wood-pigeon, and listening to all she says as if it were the gospel? I know what old people are; you have only got to flatter them and they believe it all.'

'Why don't you do it then, Maria? You make good use of Granny, but you never put yourself out to say a civil word to her.'

'I can't be a humbug,' said Maria sharply. 'As dear Mr. Supple observed the other day in his sermon, we must not pander to unchristian desires. I caught Luce yawning over the delightful volume of sermons I was reading aloud the other night, but she never yawns when she reads that interminable poetry to Granny.'

'You should have brought up your girls to read poetry then.'

'I'll trouble you to leave my girls alone, poor darlings; they are not hypocrites.'

'Well, settle it your own way. I think Luce a very nice girl, unaffected and civil, which is more than most modern minxes are—and she can ride.' Therewith Uncle Vincent departed to the stables to try and find Dick, with whom he desired a serious consultation. Things had not gone quite so well as he wished. The mare lamed herself one night in her box, and her work was stopped in consequence. This had thrown her out and made her go back in the betting, added to which there were ugly rumours about a dark horse, which had been kept specially for the Liverpool, and of whom the owners entertained sanguine anticipations. He found Dick smoking in the stables as he had expected, amusing himself with a couple of terriers, who were springing up and barking to their heart's content, while the bay horse in the stable looked round in silent wonder and contempt.

'The mare has been lame,' blurted out Uncle Vincent gloomily, when he approached.

'What! Fairy Queen?' said Dick, stooping to feel the horse's legs.

'Yes, and it's the devil!' Uncle Vincent put his hands in his pockets and stared at the neat straw plaiting that edged the stall.

'I suppose she's all right again?' said Dick, sticking his pipe more firmly in the side of his mouth.

'Oh! yes, she's right again, but——'

'But what? Did you get all the money on?'

'Yes, but there's no chance of hedging at present, and I've laid against the favourite. If we shouldn't win ——'

'I thought you said we *should* win?' said Dick, less absently, straightening himself.

'Of course I expect we shall, but just now I'm a good deal pressed—you couldn't lend me something, just for a month or two?'

'I haven't a mag, myself, and I cannot think of asking Granny again.'

'And there are the training bills,' added Uncle Vincent in a sepulchral tone.

'Hang it! I wish I had never listened to you at all. It is much better fun betting on other people's horses than keeping them one's self, with all the confounded worries they entail upon you.'

'If you don't want a share of the mare you can say so, I'll let you off, only I can't pay you for a bit.'

'I don't mind; the mare seems a good thing. You have not told anyone I am part owner, have you? for I don't want Granny to hear of it.'

'As it happens, you are entire owner just now,' grinned Uncle Vincent, 'for you advanced the money, and wrote me a line to that effect, which letter I kept—for business is business, you know.'

'Well, if I think things look ugly I shall find a purchaser for the mare, that's all,' said Dick airily, turning away to the loose box, where the grey, who knew his voice, gently whinnied him a welcome. Uncle Vincent was only half satisfied. Dick was too indifferent to go heart and soul into the business, and too sharp to be made a thorough tool of. Had he not been so, Uncle Vincent would have entertained no scruples on the score of relationship. He despised people who dealt in false delicacy: 'the world is made for us all,' he would say, 'and each man has a right to get the best place he can in it.' He and his wife were thoroughly agreed in their worship of self,

but she carried it into the petty details of cast-off dresses, filching of grocery, or implied dishonesty in letting Granny pay the bills she herself had incurred ; while Uncle Vincent dealt with things in a broader and more manly spirit ; in common parlance he was a sharp, could tinker up a screw, or sell an unsound or vicious horse for a sound one, and cheat a friend out of a sixpence, but he was no humbug. His very bluntness and heartiness caused Dick to bear him a grudging goodwill, and his companions to speak of him as 'a capital fellow.' Nevertheless, if he could have seen his way towards jockeying Dick he would have done so with pleasure and chuckled over his own cleverness. It was infernally hard upon a fellow, he reflected, to be as it were dependent upon a boy like Dick, and forced to come to cringing to him for a few dribblets of money which ought by rights to have been his. He had a grudge against fate. When his elder brother died, the baby had no business to live, and grow up to plague deserving people with its health and strength, and prove a thorn in their side.

CHAPTER XVI.

WAS IT LOVE?

LUCE had formed a habit of taking long and solitary walks. She was fond of exercise, and Granny insisted on her going out every afternoon. At first Luce demurred, saying she would prefer to drive with Granny or accompany her up and down the terrace, should she feel inclined to stroll. But Granny was firm. 'It is too cold to drive,' she said, 'and if I want to walk Mrs. Vincent will give me an arm ; but you are young, and you must run and step out and spring along as becomes your age.' Luce obeyed. Granny's gentle exhortations, firm and mild as they were, had a different ring from Lady Eleanor's cold formulas. To walk for one's complexion, to prevent one's self looking sallow, seemed the direct converse to walking for one's pleasure in clear frosty air, tinged with exhilarating freshness.

Luce was returning one afternoon from an expedition to a distant common, where the low thorn-trees formed in summer a favourite resort for the nightingales. She was accompanied by Vic, the terrier, who had taken a violent fancy to her, and was stepping along quickly, notwithstanding her previous long walk. Behind her the sun, an incandescent ball, rested in a blood-red sheet of flame, which filled the horizon with a lurid

glare, and threw a mantle of roseate hues over the bare branches of the distant trees ; beyond, the sky was of a pure steely blue, in which a few stars twinkled ; above, the crescent moon gleamed coldly. The air was calm ; but to stand still, even for an instant, became unpleasant and chilling to the blood. Luce hurried on ; it was getting late. Turning a corner she came up at right angles with a man who was getting over a stile out of a stubble field. A dog accompanied him, whom Vic, running forward, saluted joyously, presently rubbing herself up against his owner's legs, and thereby acknowledging her master.

'Miss Windermere !' said he, stopping to shift his gun on to the other shoulder, 'how late you are ; where have you been ?'

'To Thornham Common,' she answered.

'That is a long walk. I did not know you were a great pedestrian. I thought you were only a drawing-room young lady,' said Dick with a laugh.

'This is not much of a walk, but I have the use of my limbs, I am happy to say.'

'And you don't mind walking alone.'

'I am accustomed to it,' she answered briefly.

Dick accommodated his long stride to hers, and quite naturally prepared to walk home with her. For the first time they were alone together.

Their conversation, confidential as it had sometimes been, was always carried on in company, for the careless buzz of a drawing-room confers almost as great privacy as can be obtained on a lonely mountain-side. She and Dick were accustomed to society, and knew how to make the most of their advantages. But this solitary walk with the ruddy sunset, and the heavenly glow upon the silent earth ; the chill landscape, devoid of all animal life ; the strangeness, mingled with the sense of comfort that came over her—was a new experience. For a while she remained silent, commonplaces seemed foolish and unreal. Dick was silent, too ; then, as they passed a small plantation, 'To heel, Rover !' he cried, 'to heel ; that brute of a dog is after a rabbit.' This little incident, which occupied a few moments before the refractory dog—who had ranged around rejoicing in the new-found experience of mischief, followed by Vic, to whom the temptation proved likewise overwhelming (for dogs, like men, easily copy a bad example)—had been chastised, reproved, and once more reduced to orderly behaviour, broke the ice, and dispelled the strangeness which had arrested Luce's tongue.

'I'm so very glad you and Granny get on,' said Dick, whose

observation of domestic affairs was tolerably keen ; ' it is a great pleasure to her to have your company.'

' No one could help loving her,' said Luce warmly ; ' she is as good as you said, only still more perfect.'

' I don't like perfection myself as a rule,' observed the young man, ' it is generally so deuced disagreeable ; but I must say Granny is kindness itself. I often feel sorry to see how shamefully Uncle Vincent and his wife trade upon her kindness.' Dick omitted to state that he had frequently done the same, and the slight return he had offered her.

' She is devoted to you,' said Luce ; ' she would like to have you always with her.'

' Well, that is not possible,' laughed the young man.

' But now, when you are in Parliament, your duties to your constituents will bring you here oftener.'

' Oh, yes, I suppose they may ; but you know, however fond I am of Granny, Long Leam is but a dull hole ; I'm not master here ; I can't do a thing, and my uncle and aunt are almost always about poking their noses everywhere and interfering. Since you came it has been different ; you understand me, and you're young.'

' Yes, I am young,' answered Luce, feeling grateful for this bond of sympathy between them.

' And there is no nonsense about you—you are not vain like Maud, nor a prude like Aunt Vincent.'

Luce was silent—she could not appraise herself.

' Some day you will marry,' she said softly, ' and then you will not be lonely.'

' Marry—no, I shan't marry !' he said quickly.

Luce threw him a curious glance.

' I mean, I don't think I shall ever care for any woman enough to marry her——'

' Oh, Mr. Carrol, I am sure you will.'

' That is to say—I don't mind telling you, Luce (let me call you Luce, it is less stiff)—I have loved, I did love once—some one—very dearly indeed.'

' And she died ?' asked Luce, in a low sympathetic voice.

' No, she is married !'

' Then she did not care ?'

' To tell you the truth I do not know. I thought, I believed she did. I was mad and reckless and foolish, but she kept her head—and married.'

' Poor Dick !' sighed Luce.

' I felt it, I can tell you ; that was what made me take to

politics, just to crush the pain. What did I say, that I would never marry? *Of course* I shall marry anyone Granny likes; it is nothing to me now I can't have *her*, and that is all over.'

At that instant the fiery glow faded out of the sky, the sun dropped, and with it gloom and darkness shrouded everything. Luce felt as though the light had gone out of her life. Dick could never love again.

'Why is not everyone like you, Luce? Why are there hard things, and cruel things, and selfish people in the world? You have a kind heart, I know; you pity me.'

'Yes, I pity you,' said Luce, putting her little hand gently on his arm. 'I know what it is not to be loved——'

'It is not only that, but to feel that she belongs to another. God! I can't bear even to think of it,' and he clenched his hand violently.

'It is very bad, I know,' said Luce soothingly.

They walked a little way in silence. Then he said, stopping suddenly to look at her:

'What a strange girl you are, Luce. I do believe you care what happens to me, and yet you listen sweetly to what would make some women mad. They cannot bear to hear another praised.'

'I suppose she was very beautiful,' said Luce calmly.

'Yes, she was beautiful—to my mind the most beautiful creature I ever saw, but what of that—her beauty did not keep her true—Ah! if she had only been like you—I know *you* are true.'

'Thank you,' said Luce simply.

'I shall never forget her; of course it has altered my whole life, but I shall try to make the best of things.'

'You have great scope.'

'Do you know, Luce, perhaps Granny was right. I ought to marry—the sense that I was bound to another woman would prevent any vain harkings back—make the breach irrevocable—I do so fear being weak again; that woman has bewitched me, I believe.'

'It would not be fair to marry while you feel like that,' said Luce decisively.

'I would be good to my wife, I would study her wishes, she should have the best of everything.'

'Except love.'

'Say rather except passion—I should love her in a different way.'

They had reached the gates of Long Leam and turned into

the avenue ; the dogs ran on in front joyfully sniffing and smelling about ; the moon threw silvery gleams of light across the road, and Luce's face looked almost ghastly in its pallor. In another instant they would part indifferently, and a conversation so strange, so intimate, never be renewed. Luce made an effort.

'Thank you for telling me,' she said ; 'I am so sorry you have suffered.'

'It sours a man,' he said gloomily, kicking away with his boot a little mound of gravel ; 'but I suppose it happens to every one.' And then they mounted the steps and rang the bell, and went into the firelight and cosiness, where Granny waited with the tea.

'What a little ghost you look !' said Granny kindly, as she patted Luce's cold cheeks.

'These roads are not safe for girls to be out after dark,' remarked Mrs. Vincent sharply, looking up from her knitting ; 'but then, to be sure, you had an escort. Pray, Dick, did you go out with Miss Luce, or meet her by appointment?'

'I fell in with her accidentally, and was exceedingly surprised to see her, wasn't I?' said Dick, addressing Luce, and pouring himself out a cup of strong black tea.

'Why don't you ask one of my girls to go with you?' said Mrs. Vincent severely to Luce ; 'I am sure it would be much better than trapesing about the country alone like a gipsy. You will be robbed and murdered some day.'

'I am not worth robbing,' said Luce with a faint smile.

'Thieves cannot know that ; by the time they have found it out you will be knocked down and battered about in the mud.'

'There's a pleasant look-out for you,' said Dick cheerfully. 'Aunt Vincent certainly has the most depressing ideas.'

'I am not a fool,' said Mrs. Vincent, with a fresh accent of dignity.

'Heaven defend me from accusing you of such a thing ; you are sharp enough for me.'

The little sparring matches which went on between Dick and his aunt amused him while they angered her, and served the present purpose of distracting her attention from Luce, to whom her stabs gave evident pain. The latter threw Dick a grateful look, and stole nearer to Granny, in whose love was to be found honourable shelter.

That evening Granny played on the piano quaint sparkling gavottes and slow graceful minuets, and rippling fugues, stiff antiquated music often in the minor mode, set in its simple chords and

perfect cadences. She characterized modern music as froth and flimflams, abhorring with all the righteous horror of her soul the glaring discords and meaningless changes and artificial harmonies which make up a great share of its composition. Luce sat by the fire listening. As Granny's thin fingers glided gently over the keys—with a delicacy and precision wanting to many brilliant performers—the tightness at her heart relaxed, the keen pain she was enduring grew more tolerable, a gentle pity took the place of wounded love. Who was she, what was she, to exact more than could be given her? Trust, confidence, affection—she had all of these—and yet she wanted more; her hungry heart cried out for nourishment for the strong satisfying meat of love, and not the phantom food of friendship. Granny's life neared its close; those agile fingers must soon relax their grip, and fall nerveless by her side; the warm heart cease to beat, the eye gloss over with the film of death. What had she received, what happiness gilt her declining years, what prudent careful hand guided her steps, and given back love for love? None that Luce could see, yet Granny was serenely, beautifully happy. 'It will come, I suppose, in time; when I am old I shall be happy,' she thought, and rose to light Granny's candle. Usually Luce lingered a while in Granny's bedroom chatting or reading her to sleep; to-night the old lady dismissed her quickly.

'Go, dear,' she said, 'you look tired; I am a selfish old woman to keep you—go, rest well; God bless you, my own dear child.'

Granny folded her in her arms, and the withered cheek held a sweetness for Luce of which the peach-blossom skin of Lady Eleanor owned no suspicion. The one is human flesh, she thought, the other pearl powder and cold cream. Luce waited till old Jane the maid appeared, carefully extinguishing her dip in the doorway as she entered, and proceeded to remove Granny's pretty cap, and let the flowing grey hair about her shoulders. Luce was never tired of admiring the old lady as she sat there, patiently submitting to the maid's ministrations.

'When I am old my hair will be grey too, and I shall be glad to be like you, Granny,' she said playfully as she retired. Luce had to traverse the whole length of the broad corridor before arriving at her own room, and, as she did so this evening, through the swing-door at the end hurriedly burst Dick, in smoking-jacket and slippers.

'Is that you, have you left Granny—I wanted to speak to her?'

'She is going to bed. She dismissed me early ; I think you had better not disturb her—it might interfere with her night's rest.'

'Then I will not. Luce, stay a moment ; you cannot be tired.' He took the candle gently from her hand, and put it on an old Italian chest that stood near. 'Let me ask you a question. Do you remember our conversation of this afternoon?'

'Yes,' faltered Luce, scared at this opening.

'Well, I told you my story. I was honest, at least ; many a man might not have confessed. I told you I must marry, Granny wishes it. She urged me again this evening. I cannot love as I have done, you know, but my wife will be very dear to me ; can you—will you be that wife?'

Luce shrank away ; she covered her face with her hands.

'Don't shrink from me, dear. I tell you sincerely I never met a woman so true, so kindly as yourself ; we should not quarrel, I am sure. I can give you a nice home and comfort, and you love Granny——'

'I could not make you happy——'

'Oh yes, I am easily pleased ; you suit me ; we have the same tastes ; I shall grow very fond of you, my little gentle mouse——'

'No, no !' faltered Luce.

'You need not be afraid ; I will not neglect you or be cruel to you. I shall love you as a dear sister, companion, friend, truly, lastingly. Passion is not happiness, I am sure of that now ; besides, you are too young for passion ; you must never know it—I am not a bad fellow, really——'

He did not love her, yet he offered to marry her, she thought. He had treated her fairly and honourably ; would any woman ask more or refuse him, who loved as Luce did with every fibre of her heart ? She would force love from him, she felt ; would show him that she was not too young for passion (the very idea made her laugh). Some women might be too proud, might talk of self-respect, but where was the self-respect when one loved madly and unreasonably ? He would be hers, to love, to caress, to dream of, to scheme for, her life—could she part from her life ?

'Don't be startled, dear ; it seems sudden, perhaps, to you, but not to me ; ever since I have known you and watched your sweet, unselfish ways, I felt you were the woman for me, and Granny thinks so too.'

The family, then, had sat in conclave on her merits, had approved of her like a prize ox or a show cauliflower.

'You will understand me, you will be lenient to my faults—I am full of faults.'

'Ah! how you speak!' cried the girl, lashed by the violence of her feelings into speech. 'Do you think I have none? Do you think I am made of marble? Do you think I can bear to hear you ask me to marry you and in the same breath confess you do not love me? Am I not human? Am I not a woman? Do I not love you?''

The last words escaped in a sob, as Luce threw herself upon a chair and laid her burning face against its back.

'Luce, darling, *do* you love me? Ah, I never hoped for this! I thought it would be a reasonable, a commonplace marriage—but *love*——'

'Why do you talk of love? Haven't you said already there is to be none between us?'

'The case is altered—you must *make* me love you, little one, you women are so clever.'

Luce shook her head.

'I am not clever enough for *that*.'

'But a companion, Luce, a friend; a woman to whom one can tell everything, who has no petty jealousies, no envious thoughts; where could I find such another? You are priceless, Luce, unique in your sex.'

'Perhaps I shall be jealous,' said Luce slowly. 'If I love you——'

'I will take the risk, little one,' he said, wrapping her in his arms, while his silky moustache rested on her lips.

The first kiss! More suffering than bliss was contained in it. It had an acrid taste of sub-acute pain mixed with the pleasure, for she was not his really, but his only on sufferance, his by pressure of lips rather than gift of heart; his wife, his betrothed, but not *the* woman in the world for him! And yet, as she lay in his arms, despising herself for her weakness, conscious of all she was surrendering, of her young life dedicated, her body given, her soul a slave, she felt she could do no otherwise, and yielding, faintly murmured with a sigh of content, 'Mine, mine!'

CHAPTER XVII.

GRANNY'S REMINISCENCES.

As from some wonderful dream Luce awoke the next morning, asking herself if it was true. The midnight interview in the corridors, the words spoken in the silence and shadow of night, the long-drawn kiss, the moment of passion she had experienced, rose to her mind, painted in glowing mystical colours. What had she done?—betrayed her maidenly modesty, given her promise to a man who did not love her. Oh, it was weak, execrably weak, and yet she felt, did the temptation return, she must succumb to it once more. She lingered over her toilet; she dared not, with the guilty blush of shame upon her cheek, face Mrs. Vincent and her coldly cruel eyes and plausible, stinging advice. The breakfast-bell rang, but she did not stir; presently there came a tap at her door.

‘Was Miss Windermere ill? Would she like her breakfast upstairs?’

‘Oh, no, no!’ cried poor Luce, feeling that she must take the awful plunge.

In the dining-room, over the remains of breakfast, sat Mrs. Vincent, her husband, and Granny. Dick’s place was empty, but Luce divined that he had finished his meal. At least, then, she need not dread his eyes. How would he look? had he repented already? Was it only a heated fancy, born and bred of night? Would he seem cold and distant, perhaps tell her it was all a mistake? Luce approached the table slowly.

‘Come here, dear,’ said Granny, holding out her hand; ‘sit by me. Have you slept well?’

‘You went to bed early enough,’ said Mrs. Vincent sharply, ‘though I believe you amused yourself walking about afterwards; for I heard steps and voices in the corridor till any hour, and very nearly came out to see what was the matter.’ (This speech conjured up an awful vision before Luce’s eyes. If Mrs. Vincent, in nightcap and dressing-gown, had indeed appeared like an avenging fury, candle in hand, just at the instant of that portentous kiss!) ‘However, I said to myself, it’s probably only some of those silly maids whispering and giggling, and it was really too cold to turn out of bed for such nonsense.’

‘You were right not to disturb yourself,’ said Luce gravely.

‘Doesn’t the housekeeper go round the house, Granny?’ pursued Mrs. Vincent, pleased to direct her attack upon another

inoffensive creature. 'She should go round the very last thing, lock all the maids into their rooms, and see that every door is shut. *I* do that at home ; but, of course, one can never trust servants. It is very foolish to do so.'

'The doors are always locked by the butler,' said Granny quietly.

'But so often men are drunk. It is really not safe to leave it to them.'

'I can trust Porter,' said Granny ; 'he has been with me these fifteen years.'

'Ah, well, of course, if you are *sure*. Some people *have* such confidence, and seem quite surprised when they are imposed upon.'

'I would rather trust than always suspect, as you do, Maria. You render your life wretched by your suspicions.'

'That is better, at least, than to be made a fool of.'

After breakfast Luce followed Granny into her own little study, and there, having first carefully shut the door lest Mrs. Vincent's sharp ears should be within reach, she drew Luce to her, and said :

'Thank you, my dear, dear child. Dick tells me that he has asked you to be his wife.'

'But oh, Granny,' said Luce, flushing and trembling, 'I don't know whether I ought ; I am so plain, he will never love me. How *can* I make him happy ?'

'Have no fear, child. You love him ?'

'Oh, yes, I love him dearly.'

She had the right to say it now ; she raised her eyes and looked proudly at Granny. The old lady seemed to sympathize ; she patted her hair gently, and made her sit beside her.

'I am so glad to have you as a daughter : I think we understand each other.' The cold wintry sun laid a ray upon Luce's brown hair till it shone like gold, while a gleam of the sunshine sparkled in her eye. 'You must not be afraid of yourself and say you are plain. You are going to be very happy, and a happy woman is never plain. To my mind Mrs. Vincent is plain, and yet she was a fine girl in her youth, or Vincent would never have married her ; but ill-temper and envy have dragged down her mouth, and unkindness has robbed her eye of its light. Character stamps faces, you know.'

Luce realized this as she glanced at Granny's mouth—the sweetest, humanest feature in her kind countenance.

'And now, my child, I am not going to be selfish. You want to see Dick ; you have a number of things to talk about ; you

are young, and the world is before you. Go, be open and confiding with each other ; it is the secret of happiness.'

'I won't go yet,' said Luce, clinging to Granny's hand. 'I like to be with you ; you do me good ; you are so young.'

Granny smiled. That young heart of hers had played sad pranks in the aged breast, and yet she would not have changed it with Mrs. Vincent's stony organ for all the world.

'Granny, tell me about *your* youth, your time of love. How pretty you must have been then !'

'He said so—my husband ;' said Granny with a sigh. 'But he was partial, for he loved me dearly. We were very happy—but that was fifty years ago—and then he died.'

'And you never married again ?'

'Why should I ? Each fortunate creature has its gleam of sunshine on earth. I have had mine ; it could never come again. I waited, I have been waiting forty-five years ; my time is drawing near.'

'But, Granny, you have lived a dozen lives in those you have made happy.'

'I have tried my best ; though we can do little ourselves ; we must leave it all to God.'

Luce sat stroking Granny's fingers ; she did not speak, seemingly absorbed in noting the quaint-cut sparkling gems that adorned them.

'I wonder if I shall be happy, Granny ?'

'Of course you will, child ; though even should you not, remember "as your day is so shall your strength be."'

'I am not strong ; my nerves are weak—I dread to suffer—if I should prove a burden to my husband !'

'Husband' had a sweet sound ; Luce's tongue lingered over it tenderly.

'A girl who loves should not talk like this.'

'I have never believed myself destined for happiness ; a quiet twilight of contentment suits me best, the half-lights and subdued tints are mine.'

'But yet you see Providence has willed it otherwise ; He has given to me my fondest wish—a dear daughter ; and now, Luce, I cannot let you moralize any more. I shall call Dick.'

Luce submitted passively, and presently, when Granny had been absent a few moments, Dick slowly pushed the door open. His eyes took in Luce's figure, her nervous agitation, her gentle questioning look, the happiness in her eyes, that scarce suppressed, radiated at sight of him. He stepped forward and took both her hands in his.

'Luce,' he said, standing over her gravely, 'you have not repented, you mean to be my wife?'

'You really wish it?'

'Of course; I cannot trifle with such serious things.' Her eyes brightened.

'Oh, Luce!' he continued, taking a place beside her on the narrow couch. 'Granny is so pleased; she says it will be the making of me; that you are just what I wanted—the balance of love she called it in her poetical fashion.'

'But there is to be no love,' said Luce, with affright. 'Whatever might betide, there must be *truth* between them.'

'Well, we'll see about that. Won't Aunt Vincent be rabid, just?—we haven't told her yet, you know; she always hoped I should never marry, and leave her sons to inherit.'

'That was not likely,' broke in Luce hotly. 'How can people be so mean?'

'She is the incarnation of meanness; she is mean even to that poor, cunning, foolish wretch of a husband, for whom she has a sneaking affection; she stints him in his food, which makes him so fond of coming here to get a good meal, and she is always reproaching him because his nose is red, and he smells of stables.'

'Horrid!' said Luce.

'We will not be like that, Luce; we will have no secrets and no shams; if we are poor, we will be poor, and not pretend! though I know Granny will deluge us with all manner of kind things, so there is no fear of that.'

'I am glad,' said Luce, laying her head on his shoulder. 'I don't think poverty would suit you, and I should hate being the involuntary cause of it.'

'Little duck! you grow prettier every day, Luce. You must get yourself a blue gown with brown fur on it like Maud Hardfast's; it would suit you so well.'

'I don't care to dress like Maud Hardfast. I shall always be plain and simple. Aunt used to say I never did the best French dressmaker any credit.'

'But you have a neat little waist and the tiniest of hands—by Jove, Luce, what a tiny hand it is! I shall never be able to get a ring to fit you.'

'I don't want rings,' said Luce shortly.

'Rubbish! I shall give you a ring, a little plain gold band with a turquoise in it, the colour of evening sky as it is called, to remind you of that walk we took last night. Was I a brute, Luce, to talk to you as I did?'

'I should never have forgiven you if you had not told me. To think that you were unhappy and that I could help you gave me confidence. Do you really believe I shall make you happy?'

'I am sure of it,' said Dick, sealing the assertion with a kiss.

'Then, Dick,' she hesitated, twining her fingers softly round his, 'then, Dick, you will tell *her* that you mean to marry me. You will not give her unnecessary pain, not leave her to hear it from a stranger.'

'As I heard of her marriage,' interrupted Dick angrily. 'Why not? She must be nothing to me now.'

'But I should feel happier if she knew, if she gave her consent; you understand, Dick, what to say, you need not see her, I don't think I should like *that*, but just write to her kindly, to please me.'

'I think it very unnecessary,' he answered somewhat sullenly. 'Of course she does not care now—why should she? She left *me* first; she spoiled my life.'

'Oh, Dick!'

'Well,' he said, taking her in his arms, 'I mean she spoilt it until you came with your really nice ways; and now you are going to make something good of me; you will have all your work cut out, though, I tell you beforehand.'

Luce was very happy, so happy that her blunted confidence in herself returned; she was evidently not destined to be the pariah in life she had supposed, but to taste of the rich banquet of love. The reaction from severest self-denial to perfect unfolding of each hidden petal of her tender heart made the sense of bliss more exquisite. Even the letter which had to be written to Lady Eleanor cost her little effort, though she knew that the answer would inevitably pour a cold douche of worldly sarcasm upon the warmth of her feelings. Lady Eleanor promptly wrote back in a kind and congratulatory strain which seemed to her appropriate to the occasion:

'MY DEAR LUCE,

'I cannot express to you my pleasure at finding that you have at last profited by the excellent education I gave you. It is a girl's first duty to respond to the efforts her elders made on her behalf, and to do credit to her training. You must have managed well to have secured Mr. Carrol, who at his grandmother's death will inherit a handsome fortune, and, as the latter is turned seventy, you will not have long to wait. I had lately heard unfortunate rumours about Mr. Carrol's little affair with

Miss Bray before her marriage, but, of course, as he has proposed to you, this can only have been a caprice on his part, which absence and change of scene have dispelled. They tell me Mr. and Mrs. Vincent Carrol are regular sponges, and live upon the old lady; of course you will make it your business to oust them as soon as possible. There cannot be two mistresses in a household. I have always acted upon this principle in my life, and have found it answer well. Be perfectly sure of your position, and secure it by every means in your power. Is there any time proposed for the wedding? I see no reason for delay, and think that as soon as the election is over you could be married. It will not take long to get the settlements drawn out, and the trousseau ready. Let me hear what are your views on this matter, and believe me, my dear Luce,

‘Your affectionate aunt,

‘ELEANOR HIGHVIEW.’

The letter dropped from Luce’s fingers.

‘The little affair with Miss Bray.’ So that was the way Dick’s love, a love which he said had altered his whole life, was spoken of; every one was aware of it; it formed the subject of sarcastic talk between Lady Eleanor and her gossiping friends. Besides which, Lady Fenchurch lived in the next county, not more than fifteen miles from Long Leam, and Luce and she must meet and speak and smile at each other, and hold out their hands with the knowledge of the past burning in their hearts. So long as Dick’s love had been a secret confided to her only, so long as it was but a kind of honourable trust, Luce had felt capable of taking a philosophical view, in which disapproval neatly tempered by pity was not found unendurable, but to share this secret with the common herd, to hear it spoken of and glossed over, and sneered at, would need almost superhuman strength, while to feel she had contented herself with another’s leavings must be sadly wounding to vanity. Thus argued Luce. Finally reproaching herself for fainting already beneath the burden she had freely accepted, she descended to the drawing-room to sing, as was her usual habit, to Granny in the twilight. Granny was not there, however, but Mrs. Vincent was. The third day of Luce’s engagement had now arrived, and, at her earnest request, Mrs. Vincent was told nothing definite until the consent arrived from Lady Eleanor. Mrs. Vincent, however, had her suspicions, and promptly attacked Granny, who, taken at a disadvantage, was signally routed and confessed the truth.

'Ah, I always said she was a schemer,' snorted Mrs. Vincent. 'Those girls with brown hair and pale faces and quiet unobtrusive manners always are. They perpetually watch you and find out your very thoughts in the style of a perfect nineteenth-century inquisition. I knew she was up to mischief.'

'Dick loves her,' said Granny meekly.

'Fuzzle-de-boo! he loved Evelyn Bray six months ago, and he will love some one else six months hence. Luce merely flattered him and traded on his weakness; bless you, I know it all; young men are as weak as water.'

'She will make him an excellent wife.'

'And pray what did he want a wife for? Or why couldn't he have married one of his cousins? There is Dolly, who plays the piano like a professor, she will be eighteen next month; or Eliza, who draws in oils and water-colours, she is sixteen and has a lovely complexion. But to go and marry a plain girl like Luce. However, I suppose it's for her money. Will she have a large fortune?'

'As far as I know she will have none; she is entitled to none at least, unless her uncle chooses to leave her something.'

'What a disgusting affair!' responded Mrs. Vincent, flouncing out of the room.

It may be surmised from this specimen of Mrs. Vincent's feelings that when Luce found her alone in the drawing-room the former lady did not scruple to give her a bit of her mind.

'You are mighty close, miss,' she said. 'I congratulate you on being able to hold your tongue. In my day, when young ladies were engaged to be married they did not make a secret of it, but they consulted their family and asked for their consent.'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Luce, holding her music-book before her like a shield.

'Oh, don't you? I understand you wish to become my niece, but you haven't asked my advice.'

'I beg your pardon, Mrs. Vincent; I scarcely see what you have to do with me.'

'Highly-tighty, young lady, you take it very coolly. You are not mistress here yet.'

The words of Lady Eleanor's letter flashed to Luce's mind; her aunt was right; this woman would be a thorn in her side. Accustomed to gentle yielding, Luce said:

'Well, Mrs. Vincent, you don't object to me. I hope we shall be good friends.'

'Friends! you have acted like an enemy. You came here determined to captivate my nephew. I saw you, I appreciated

your little game ; you humbugged Dick, pretending to care for the dogs and the horses, and sitting open-mouthed when he talked of his speeches and his canvassing ; you, who know he can't string three words together grammatically. You did lap-dog to Granny, and boxed yourself up with her until you made her think you preferred a doting old woman's society to the amusements suited to your age. Luce Windermere, I have seen through your intrigues, I appreciate your subterfuges ; you cannot humbug *me*.'

When she paused for breath, Luce quietly observed, 'I have no wish to humbug you, Mrs. Vincent ; I wish to be friends ; but if you will not have it so, I suppose I must submit. Dick has asked me to marry him, and that is a question on which I think he must be the best judge.'

'Hear her, the little plausible minx ; just now the gentle shrinking madam did not know what I meant, but she understands at least what she means herself. You will be an excellent wife for Dick, madam ; he will not dare to say a word to save his life ; he is very fortunate, I must say, to have such a ter-magant for his own. I shan't trouble you much, oh dear, no !'

Aunt Vincent seized her worsted, skewered it with the large crochet-pin, and stalked from the room. Luce had gained a victory, but it was dearly bought. Mrs. Vincent was her enemy for life !

CHAPTER XVIII.

LADY FENCHURCH RECEIVES A LETTER.

LADY FENCHURCH meanwhile passed her time in considerable suspense and anxiety. Her canvassing was but half-hearted, for she felt herself a traitor to both causes, while she tried to shut her ears to all mention of Dick, and to devote her attention to her husband's interests. This was the less difficult, as Miss Fenchurch, with all an old maid's pertinacity, read the local Tory paper out loud every day from beginning to end, emphasizing the favourable comments upon Sir Hilary's speeches with her own pithy remarks, and holding him up to admiration on all occasions. No man need blow his own trumpet when he has adoring womankind belonging to him ; the tone they are able to produce is much more strident and far-reaching than any effort of which he is capable. Miss Fenchurch admired her brother beyond everything, and was never tired of dinning into Lady Fenchurch's ears that she ought to esteem

herself fortunate in holding the proud position of his wife. Naturally, when we are told to be thankful for undeserved blessings we rebel against the suggestion, and Lady Fenchurch scarcely felt as grateful as she ought to have done. Sir Hilary was irritable too. He was forced to get up early and drive long distances on foggy cold days, and occasionally return late for dinner, in addition to the unceasing worries of agents, electors, and the numerous temptations to bribery; and these things disturbed his equanimity and his digestion, and made him less amicable at home. It was therefore with considerable tremor that Evelyn received a letter in Dick's handwriting duly extracted from the postbag at the matutinal breakfast-table, and handed to her by Sir Hilary. He was absorbed in the perusal of his own correspondence at the moment, and did not notice that his wife, on reading the superscription of the envelope, blushed, slipped it into her pocket, and pretended to sip her tea; but Miss Fenchurch's eagle eyes observed the manoeuvre, and she quickly inquired, 'From whom is your letter, Evelyn, and what is it all about—good news, I trust?'

'It is nothing important,' said Evelyn, feeling guilty; 'dear me, how late it is to be sure; I had no idea we had been such an age at breakfast. Where are you going to-day, Hilary?'

'I have a long ride before me; Dewsnap goes too; some doubtful fellows to visit the other side of the country. I may be late for dinner; you need not wait for me——'

'*Of course* we shall wait,' said Miss Fenchurch with dignity, shutting the tea-caddy with a snap.

Evelyn hurried to her room at the earliest opportunity, and there with trembling hands she tore open her letter.

'My friends wish me to marry, but I can do nothing without telling you, Evelyn. If you do not approve, say so freely, though I scarcely think that my actions can in any way interest you now. DICK ——'

Evelyn walked up and down in agitation; a few tears sprang to her eyes. She had never cared for Dick sufficiently to break her heart for him, though she had nursed her love into an interesting and sentimental grievance. She sincerely meant to forget him, and her life with Sir Hilary was as pleasant and honourable as she had ever anticipated; yet she would have been scarcely a woman had she heard of her lover's engagement unmoved. What was she to answer; how could she write? Anger, wounded pride, and sentimental love all struggled for mastery in her breast: first she vowed he should not marry; then she said he should, and suffer for it; finally she persuaded

herself she did not care, and that it was a matter of perfect indifference to her. All the morning she walked up and down her room with impatient uneven steps, winding and crushing her pocket-handkerchief between her fingers, biting her lips, and behaving altogether like a foolish passionate woman.

Presently Miss Fenchurch knocked at the door. 'What is the matter, Evelyn? Do let me in. You fidget me so, walking up and down in that irritating way. I can hear you as I sit in the library; if you want exercise, why don't you go out, and take Jenny Jones her broth? You promised she should have it to-day.'

'I will not walk up and down any more,' said Evelyn calmly, through the half-open door. 'I am busy writing letters; if necessary, my maid can take Jenny Jones her broth.'

Jenny Jones, indeed! Broth, indeed! Far other cares occupied her thoughts. Miss Fenchurch somewhat grumblingly retired, and Lady Fenchurch once more resumed the thread of her self-discourse. For one thing she was not *very* sorry for this project of Dick's; it would have been no doubt sweet to meet occasionally, and to consider herself the guiding-star and angel of a young man's life, but then again people had gossiped a little about her. Miss Fenchurch told her this one day when she had lectured her about the propriety of demeanour necessary in the young wife of an elderly baronet. Sir Hilary's eye, too, had glittered with a strange light when he inquired if she had met Dick on the day of their last interview, and her position was altogether too comfortable and easy for her to risk the loss of it. After a while Evelyn sat down, and, taking a fair sheet of paper, she quickly wrote these few words:

'Yes, Dick, it is best so. Marry if you think it will give you happiness, and forget me. God bless you always.'

She read over this letter, and thought as she did so that a little pique sounded through the expression of her good wishes; yet, as it was written now, the sentences, poor and unsatisfactory as they seemed, must remain. The very mystery and doubt that hung about them might give more impressiveness to the decision. She closed up the letter, put it in her pocket where Dick's note rested already, and came down to luncheon dressed for driving.

'I am going into West Thorpe,' she said unconcernedly to Miss Fenchurch; 'will you come also?'

'No, thank you; I have too much regard for my health. There is a bitter east wind blowing, and I should be sure to get neuralgia.'

'Very well ; then, I will order the pony carriage and drive myself.

'Are you sure you will not catch cold ? Hilary would not like that, you know.'

'I am not afraid of a little bit of cold ; it braces me, and I can well take care of myself,' said Lady Fenchurch, somewhat haughtily. She would post her letter in West Thorpe, she said to herself, and thus feel sure it would reach its destination ; and perhaps, who could tell, see Dick walking or riding in the town ; and she would leave her pearl necklace at Cherry and Appleton the goldsmiths', and get them to restring it, for one of the beads had become detached the last time she wore it. She drove the ponies—who jumped and kicked about, and in their joy at leaving the stable nearly pulled her arms off—quickly into West Thorpe, and drew up with a splash at the door of the jeweller. One of the fat partners came out bowing and smiling. 'Now, mind, I want the necklace back on Friday,' she said, 'for Sir Hilary does not know the string is broken, and he wishes me to wear it at a large dinner-party the same night. He is very particular ; don't forget, please.'

'I won't forget, your ladyship,' said the jeweller, as he watched her flick the steaming ponies with her whip and start off again rapidly.

'A fine young woman, that,' he said to himself, as he leisurely re-entered the shop ; 'looks as if she had a will of her own, too.'

Evelyn drove about the town, bought lace at the draper's and an almanac at the stationer's, and called at the grocer's, and gave an order at the fruiterer's, and posted her letter, but no sign did she see of Dick, nor did she hear his name mentioned by any of the obsequious tradespeople who served her. Reluctantly she turned her ponies' heads, and proceeded at a more sedate pace towards home. Indeed, what had she expected ? After such a letter how could she speak to him, save as a perfect stranger ; how should she school her lips, her eyes, those tell-tale creatures ?—and yet with the duplex sensitiveness to impressions of her sex, she longed to meet him, to watch the effect of her communication, to note if he cared for the girl he was going to marry. She had a curiosity to know something about her, too ; of course, it was not a union of love. Evelyn pressed her lips together haughtily, *she* could not be forgotten already. Possibly the affair might have been arranged so as to stop the mouth of scandal. That was just like him, to be kind and considerate to her. *She* had not been so considerate,

leaving him to hear of her marriage from the newspapers ; but then men and woman were different—he was bound to regard *her* reputation, her honour, while her duties towards him were less plain and imperative. Deep in thought, she slackened her hold upon the ponies, and one of them, missing the pressure of the bit, sprang on one side shying sportively at a glistening puddle. His mistress was all attention at once.

‘Quiet, Box,’ she said, patting him gently with her whip, ‘quiet, quiet!’ As she spoke in caressing accents to her ponies she suddenly discovered what, owing to this little difficulty, had escaped her previous observation, that the horseman rapidly approaching was Dick himself. Involuntarily she checked the ponies, and he pulled up, and, as they both did so, both coloured at the recollection of their own thoughts, and remained silent. She first recovered herself.

‘I have just posted a letter to you,’ she said, with a pretty hesitation.

‘Is it satisfactory?’ he asked, eagerly.

‘How do you mean?’ She drew herself up rather stiffly. ‘I cannot tell what will satisfy you.’

What, indeed ! It was a strange position for a young woman ; and both felt it, while their very hesitation prolonged the dilemma.

‘I know you will do what is kind and wise,’ he said soothingly.

‘Kind and wise!’ she repeated ; ‘it is not so easy to know what *is* kind and wise. You must please yourself ; you have a right.’

‘I should like to be sure you are happy—that you do not care,’ he said lingeringly.

‘Of course, I am very happy ; you have no right to doubt it,’ she said haughtily. ‘I suppose it is your cousin you mean to marry?’

‘No, not my cousin—a very nice girl, though,’ Then remembering that praise of another could not be particularly agreeable to Evelyn, he added, ‘Granny wishes it ; it is to please her, you know.’

‘Exactly—you feel like a good little boy. Well, I’m sure, I hope the plan will succeed.’

Evelyn smiled somewhat sarcastically. He felt nettled.

‘I gave you the choice, you had my life in your hands—it is not too late even now.’ He knew he could count on Luce’s generosity and forbearance, especially as there was no question of love between them.

'Evelyn, pray speak! What do you wish?'

'I wish nothing. I am satisfied you should do what you think best for yourself.'

'Evelyn! Evelyn! if things had been different——'

'Well, it is of no use thinking of that now, is it?' she said, flicking one of the ponies so that he started, then checking him abruptly with a turn of her wrist, 'we had better talk of something else.'

'You have been shopping?' he asked absently, biting his moustache and wondering how far he dare speak of his feelings.

'Yes,' she answered lightly, 'buying trash, the kind of useless trifles women can never resist when they see them in shops—would you like an almanac for the new year?—and I have been leaving my pearl necklace to be restrung at the jewellers. It was a birthday present from Sir Hilary, you know, and he likes me particularly to wear it.'

'Which jeweller do you employ?' he asked mechanically, still pondering what he should say next.

'Oh, the old-established pair, Cherry and Appleton. What funny old men those two partners are, with their rosy cheeks and bald heads; and the way they have of always washing their hands with imaginary soap as they talk to you.'

Dick thought Evelyn had not improved; her manner was decidedly flippant.

'I must go now: you will let me know the result of my letter—or no, you had better not—I shall learn it soon enough, this is such a gossiping county.'

And with these light words they parted; the impatient ponies gladly obeyed the encouragement given them to go, and shaking their merry heads trotted off briskly.

Dick, left alone, brushed his hand across his eyes, and somewhat moodily rode on. So it was over; he was free; and henceforth a Parliamentary career and Luce must be his guiding stars. How easily she had quitted him; how little she had appeared to care; and yet for that woman he nearly broke his heart, as near, namely, as a gay young man can ever break what he is pleased to call his heart. He had endured horrid scruples and bitter thoughts, and sleepless nights, and once his appetite had failed, and he had felt weary and disillusioned and sad; and behold in the same breath she could give him his *congé*, drive her ponies gaily, and prattle of the birthday present Sir Hilary had given her, pearls, precious stones—of course no woman could resist their fascination. He did not know that women hide the deepest grief under a gay exterior; that dis-

simulation and smiles are the parry and thrust of the sexes' lively fencing. Had he beheld Evelyn a moment later, with the gaiety vanished, the brow puckered, the lips close pressed and drawn down, and sombre annoyance written upon her countenance, perhaps he might have changed his opinion. Notwithstanding the east wind, the ponies steamed and panted when they stopped at the bottom of the stone steps of Oakdene. Evelyn threw the reins carelessly on their backs, while the agile groom jumped down and ran up the steps to ring the bell.

'Sir Hilary has returned,' said the butler, when he assisted Lady Fenchurch out of the carriage, 'and he expects you in the library.'

'Why, it is not tea-time yet, is it Jones?' asked Evelyn wonderingly.

'No, my lady, it has but just struck four.'

Leisurely stripping off her gloves as she went along, Evelyn pushed open the door of the library, and beheld Miss Fenchurch and her brother in close confab on the rug in front of the fire.

'Shocking! how ungrateful!' Miss Fenchurch was saying in shrill maidenly tones. They parted guiltily at Evelyn's approach, who, with cheeks slightly reddened by the chill atmosphere in which she had been driving, and eyes still glistening with emotion, looked questioningly towards them.

'Ah! here is Evelyn,' said Miss Fenchurch. 'Now I will just leave you two together, while I go and finish marking those pocket-handkerchiefs of yours, Hilary.'

Miss Fenchurch, with angular activity, slipped from the room, and left the husband and wife alone.

Sir Hilary, who was dressed in riding-clothes, began to flick nervously with his whip against his high leather boots, while Lady Fenchurch, engaged in unbuttoning her sealskin jacket, remarked unconcernedly upon his early return.

'How soon you came home to-day, Hilary! I thought you said you were going for a long ride with Dewsnap, and that we were not to wait dinner for you. I never expected to see you already,' she said cheerfully.

'I have no doubt you did not,' he answered drily.

'I hope you are not ill?' she continued, in a tone of wifely concern.

'Oh dear no—not that I am aware of.'

'Haven't you had a good day, dear?'

'Well, I don't know what *you* call a good day; I should call it a very bad one,' he answered sharply.

‘What is it—won’t you tell me? I am so sorry, Hilary,’ said Evelyn sweetly.

‘Sorry! Fashionable wives don’t care much about their husbands’ annoyances.’

‘I am not a fashionable wife.’

‘You are trying to be one.’

‘What is the matter, Hilary? Do speak out.’

‘It might not be pleasant for you if I spoke out; however, I will be as explicit as I can. Tell me truly; did you gain or lose by marrying me? Have I been kind to you; let you have all you wished for—given you presents?’

‘Yes, yes!’ cried Evelyn wonderingly, remembering the pearl necklace, and Sir Hilary’s generosity, ‘you have been most kind.’

‘And how have you repaid me? I certainly was not a puling schoolboy when I married you. I did not write verses to your eyes, or compare you to the moon, or practise any of the silly sentimental fashions of young fools. I did not do this, and I did not think you would expect me to do it, but I gave you my name, and a position, and a home, and everything which an honest man can give his wife. Say, did I, or did I not?’ as Sir Hilary spoke he drew himself up.

‘You have behaved very well.’

‘Then why do you on your part deceive me, and disgrace me, and make my name a by-word?’

‘I? Hilary, what do you mean?’

‘You know, you know well enough, you had a love affair with that young Dick Carrol while you were engaged to me; you met him at the Meynells’, they told me so themselves; he was in Switzerland at the very time of our honeymoon, I believe you saw him; you have met him since, clandestinely, on the road to-day even for aught I know.’

Evelyn turned white, and her knees trembled under her; appearances were certainly suspicious; yet she was really innocent, but could she convince Sir Hilary of this? He was a rough, straightforward, honourable man, he would understand none of the delicate mental sophistry in which feminine minds excel; his anger once excited would, she knew, be difficult to allay. He continued:

‘Why you didn’t marry him I am at a loss to conceive; you *were* free once, and no one would have objected; instead of which you let me become your husband under false pretences, to redeem the word I gave your father (a real gentleman if ever there was one) when he died under my roof, and I promised

to take care of his daughter. How could I do this better than by marrying you? Evelyn, you have treated me shamefully!

'Indeed, Hilary, if you will only listen, I am not so guilty as you think.'

'Not so guilty! I only acknowledge two things—right and wrong.'

'I mean I have been a good wife to you, and I intend to continue; don't be so harsh in your judgments; if I—if Mr. Carrol—'

'If you love each other, I suppose you mean, what does it signify? But it does signify; I'll stand no playing fast and loose under my roof; answer me, has there been any love-making between you and Carrol?—I want a plain answer, yes or no.' He seized her hand and held her at arm's length threateningly. The blood crimsoned his wife's fair cheek, and the veins in her neck swelled visibly.

'You must not speak like that,' she said haughtily. 'I am not a prisoner.'

'No, by heaven!' he said bitterly, letting her go and falling back a step. 'I know that; and no bars and bolts can keep a woman from getting her head loose, and doing as she pleases. Well, answer me, tell me the truth if you can.'

'The truth is this,' she said rapidly, hurrying her words as if to get the anguish of speaking over quickly. 'The truth is that I *did* meet Dick Carrol at the Meynells'; he liked me, he said, and I listened, for a little—then I remembered you.'

'It was high time you did,' muttered her husband between his teeth.

'And I told him of my engagement, and that I meant to keep it; after that I married. I have seen Mr. Carrol once or twice since accidentally—that is all I have to tell you.'

'My sister says you blushed violently to-day when a letter was put into your hands; you seemed agitated all the morning and drove into West Thorpe this afternoon. Was the letter from Mr. Carrol, and did you see him?'

'He wrote to tell me he was going to be married; I saw him coming out of West Thorpe; I met him riding, and we spoke a few moments about nothing—I said I had been shopping.' Sir Hilary's brow grew more cloudy.

'Very nicely concocted, a sweet simple story, which does your heart and your head credit, only unfortunately I don't believe a word of it.'

'Hilary!' she exclaimed in amaze.

‘Evelyn ! You must try to understand that I resent being imposed upon ; when I deal fairly with people I expect them to deal fairly with me ; you have not done so, consequently I cannot believe the most plausible story you may set up.’

‘Don’t be jealous, Hilary,’ she pleaded.

‘Jealous ! am I jealous ? I don’t think so ; I wish to be just, just to you and just to myself. All this affair is too new and too unfortunate for you and me to discuss it quietly. Go to your room, Evelyn ; let us both think—and try to have confidence in me if you can,’ he added more gently.

‘You will not believe me ; what can I say, what can I do ? I would not make you unhappy, or vex you, if I could help it. I am not really to blame. I was only weak and foolish—and afraid,’ she said falteringly.

‘Yes,’ he said, conducting her to the door with his old-fashioned politeness, which, even at such moments, did not desert him. ‘Yes, weak and foolish, that is what all women begin by, and then later they are not afraid to be wicked.’

Evelyn sobbed when she reached her room ; she threw her gloves and hat petulantly aside and cried till she was tired. To be disbelieved, to be worried and badgered about a lover whom she had rejected of her own accord, and who was now about to console himself with another woman, seemed too cruel and unjust. Friendless and alone, as she was, there was no one to help or advise her. She loathed the hour in which she first met Dick ; she almost hated him for having brought such trouble upon her ; just for a little bit of flirtation, a few idle words of love, to be punished like this—certainly it was unendurable. She had meant nothing serious, a May-day fancy only, which, once dismissed from her mind, should have been forgotten by everyone else ; and which, were it not for the headstrong passion of her lover, might have resulted in no serious consequences. She was not even flattered by the persistency of his affection, for had he remained abroad, and never written to her, all would have been well. She was impatient at her helplessness, and angry with everyone concerned.

At five o’clock Miss Fenchurch entered the room with a cup of tea and a plate of muffins. ‘Hilary sent you this,’ she said with a studied air of indifference.

‘Why, I am not a prisoner !’ cried Evelyn, starting up dishevelled from the bed where she was lying.

‘He thought that just now, perhaps, you would rather not come down.’

'And the servants, what will they think? Tell him I am obliged for the tea, but I shall certainly make a point of appearing at dinner.'

'Evelyn, do not make Hilary angry,' warned Miss Fenchurch.

'Angry! it is I who am angry. I told him the truth, and he does not believe me. Rachel, now say, do I look like a guilty wife?'

She threw herself impulsively into the old maid's arms. '*You* believe me, don't you?'

'Yes, yes, my dear!' said Miss Fenchurch, gently disentangling herself from the embrace, and speaking soothingly, as she might to a naughty child; 'I am quite sure you would not be so wicked as to deceive Hilary, the very best of men. *You* know what his truth and honour are, and how much he thinks of them.'

'But I have truth and honour too,' said Evelyn tearfully, 'and I have done nothing wrong, except, perhaps, to marry him.'

'Hush, my dear!' Miss Fenchurch looked as shocked as possible at such a sentiment. 'You must try and deserve his favour, and not irritate him with your obstinacy, and I will tell him that, on account of the servants, you think it better to come down to dinner. He will quite understand, for he detests anything like a family quarrel before one's inferiors.'

It is probable that had Lady Fenchurch really been guilty of a grave crime for which she was enduring agonies of remorse, she could scarcely have suffered more than she did at that instant from the pangs of wounded self-love, anxiety, and angry pique. For a great passion strips insignificant things of all their sting, and in its vastness merges all petty miseries.

CHAPTER XIX.

DICK ACCEPTS A TRUST.

DICK rode home thoughtfully. Some people would have called it a stroke of luck that Evelyn, contrary to the rapaciousness of her sex, should so easily have consented to resign him to another. Yet he felt aggrieved and at the same time more easy in his mind. The next morning he received Lady Fenchurch's letter. As soon as he found himself on the terrace, where he now regularly smoked his morning cigar, with Luce by his side, he pulled it out of his pocket.

'There, Luce, there is a letter from the woman I loved so

foolishly. She does not care a bit for me, but you were justified in making me write to her.'

Luce read, and, when she had done so, smoothed out the letter carefully.

'I think she did care, Dick, but she is evidently proud and right-minded. Well, all is clear before you now, at any rate.'

'She was a heartless coquette!' Dick puffed vehemently at his cigar.

'No, no, Dick, don't reproach her; and try to be a little happy with me,' she said gently.

'You angel!' said Dick rapturously. Kindly feeling and absence of envy seemed a rare thing in his young experience.

'Not an angel, please; nobody was ever in love with an angel, and I want you——' hesitating, 'to love me some day, Dick.'

'The some day will be sooner than you think, perhaps.' He took her hand kindly.

'Don't talk nonsense, Dick—why here is Granny.'

It was indeed Granny come out in the sunshine to look at her two dear children—the children of her old age, who had succeeded in making her heart glad.

'Vincent wants you in the stables, Dick,' she said in her kind voice, as Dick hurried up and offered his arm. 'Never mind me now; Luce will help the old woman.'

Luce brightly accepted the trust, and her lover departed whistling.

He found Uncle Vincent pacing up and down the yard, speaking in a loud angry voice to the stable-men, who flew to execute his behests. 'A parcel of lazy, idle, good-for-nothing blockheads,' he was saying. 'I've a great mind to sack you all; don't know your business, and don't want to know it, and get drunk whenever you can.' Uncle Vincent had been drinking too; the tip of his nose was redder than usual, and his voice was rasping and coarse.

'What is it?' said Dick, appearing smiling and fresh as a rosebud on the scene. Fortune was dealing kindly enough with him just now, and her favours were written in the clear eye and lazy contented voice.

'Ah, is that you, Dick? Come here, I want a word with you, my dear fellow. I must have your advice—listen.' He drew him aside while the stable-men clattered to and fro with their buckets. 'Fairly Queen has broken down!'

'Broken down!' Dick stood aghast. Only this very instant he had felt so confident in his good luck.

'There is nothing to be done—we must scratch her.'

'What! is the thing already known?' gasped Dick.

'It was in the paper this morning.' Uncle Vincent drew out and unfolded a crumpled piece of pink paper he had thrust into his pocket. 'Those touts know everything—cursed brutes——'

'And you haven't hedged?' murmured Dick, as the letters danced before his eyes.

'Scarcely at all, and we shall have to pay up shortly.'

'It will be very inconvenient,' said Dick.

'More than inconvenient for me—it's impossible,' answered Uncle Vincent.

'What is to be done? Why did you ever persuade me into this?' angrily said Dick.

'Oh, come, you're of age. You could judge for yourself,' said Uncle Vincent spitefully.

'Granny won't like my asking her again for money, just now, too, when I'm engaged to be married,' Dick reflected.

'That's true, then? I heard a rumour of it——'

'It is true. Now what do you propose? We must pay up. I could manage £300 or £400, I think, if I tried.'

'But I had backed her for as much. I tell you what it is. My mother has just given a cheque of three hundred to my wife for the girls' lessons, clothes, etc. I saw it in her desk; I'll get her to hand it over to me, and you can make it good later on. If you will cash it at West Thorpe this afternoon I can pay the fellow at once, for I should not like to send a cheque of my mother's to Jimmy Shaw, who made the bet.'

'Well, I suppose if the cheque is your wife's you can let the girls wait a bit; but it is the very last time, Uncle Vincent, I will have anything to do with your racing transactions—I am not going to bet any more——'

'Of course not,' said his uncle, putting the tip of his forefinger somewhat irreverently up to his nose, 'of course not; "when the devil was sick"—we all know the rest.'

'If you want me to cash that cheque you had better make haste,' interrupted Dick; 'I am going into West Thorpe immediately, and I must collect all my own ready money to pay off those idiotic bets.'

Dick proved as good as his word. He cashed the cheque at the bank, and having settled, not without considerable difficulty, his own share in the transaction, he dismissed the subject lightly from his mind, and proceeded to stroll about the town. Suddenly he remembered that he had lost his watch-key, and

resolved to go into Cherry and Appleton's and buy another. While the attentive shopman was serving him, Dick noticed a parcel lying on the counter directed to Lady Fenchurch. The name attracted his attention, and he got up to look a little closer.

'Ah, that,' said the assistant, noticing the direction of his eyes, 'is a parcel we are just sending to Lady Fenchurch; it contains her pearl necklace—a very fine one—a birthday present from Sir Hilary; he is a gentleman of great taste. Her ladyship called here and left it herself two days ago, and desired particularly that it might be sent her to-day without delay; she is most anxious to wear it on Friday evening. It is rather a long way to send by hand, but we were afraid there might be some delay if we trusted to the post, and her ladyship was so very particular.'

'How do you send it?'

'By hand—by special messenger. It is a little inconvenient, but we are most anxious not to disappoint her ladyship, who is a very good customer.'

'Of course——' Dick hesitated. 'I have to ride past the lodge-gates this afternoon on business of my own—I suppose it would not be any assistance to you if I offered to leave it?'

'I am sure it would, sir; I will just speak to Mr. Cherry.'

Mr. Cherry, a bland obese personage, on being applied to, came forward civilly and thanked Dick.

'We shall be much obliged to you, sir, if you will kindly take the trouble to leave it.'

Dick pocketed the parcel, and, with a lingering feeling of pleasure at being the fortunate means of doing any little service for his lady-love, rode off quickly. He had not gone many miles before he met Gubbins primed with interesting intelligence and effusive bustle.

'So glad to see you, my dear fellow; a most important voter lives near here; you must come with me at once; he is very troublesome, and wants a great deal of persuasion,' said Gubbins warmly.

'But I am on my way to Fairholt.'

Dick did not like to mention that he had promised to leave a parcel for Lady Fenchurch; he was not quite certain if she would approve.

'Never mind, you can go there afterwards,' said the agent.

Dick reluctantly turned his horse's head and followed Gubbins. The interview proved longer and more vexatious than they had anticipated; the afternoon waned, and what

with the talk and the worry, and Slyforth's monopolization of all his thoughts, Dick completely forgot the parcel with which he had been entrusted. The next day he started again early, and the packet which his valet had extracted from the pocket of his coat, and laid in his master's drawer, again failed to recur to Dick's memory. In fact, when later on these trivial facts assumed a terrible importance, Dick could not remember what he had done with the necklace, and only retained the distinct recollection of having put it in his pocket. He had been so absorbed and engrossed with the business of electioneering that he ceased to take an interest in anything else. He liked the sense of being flattered and consulted, and feeling himself a person of importance. He was remarkably sensitive to the good opinion of his neighbours, while taking little pains to conciliate it; he liked to be the best mounted and the best dressed man at the covert side; he liked to be thought and rated as a good shot, and asked to join the best battues in the neighbourhood. In short, he liked to be talked about and praised. He would have preferred to conduct battues of his own (but in this case Granny was inexorable; she would spend no unnecessary money in rearing quantities of fat pheasants merely for the satisfaction of so-called sportsmen, whose habit it is ruthlessly to slaughter and to sell them, thus converting sport into a mercantile transaction), and in his own mind he already drew a flattering and agreeable picture of himself as a popular M.P., and a personage in the arena of politics. Each day that passed confirmed him more and more in the conviction that Lady Fenchurch's marriage had been a fortunate thing for him. If the clandestine love affair had dragged on; if Sir Hilary had ever heard of it, and made a troublesome fuss, as he might have done, being neither a Londoner nor a heartless *roué*, but only a sober practical country squire, jealous of his name and his honour; if Luce had not been as she was—the sweetest and the most amiable of her sex, and allied to Lady Eleanor Highview, whose connections, being of the most excellent blue blood, were necessarily of great assistance in all social requirements; had all these various things been different, he would probably have cursed his luck about Fairy Queen, and done his best to feel miserable. As it was, the polling-day approached, and his prospects were fair. The finest anticipations are always raised by untried horses, and the balance of probability in the result of the fickle mob's favour seemed rapidly to point towards Dick's candidature.

Luce had returned to Highview nominally on the score of propriety (now that her engagement was gradually hinted abroad, though still supposed to be involved in mystery), but, as Dick laughingly declared, really in order to spend her aunt's fortune in laces and ribbons preparatory to spending his. Old Mrs. Carrol was duly closeted with her lawyer for a portion of every day, discussing ways and means, marriage settlements, younger children's portions, and widows' jointures, and all the legal jargon which provides for a woman from the time of her birth till the day of her death, and never leaves her a free agent for an instant. Mrs. Vincent, surrounded by Dolly and Eliza, concocted spring garments out of the remains of last year's wardrobe, and the booty of which she had rifled Granny's drawers.

The family were thus employed one morning when Mrs. Carrol, having emerged from her study to ask a question of Dick, who, sauntering up and down smoking, merely put in his head at the long window, holding his cigar behind his back that the smoke might not incommode his grandmother. The family, thus innocently and harmoniously collected, might have seemed basking in the sunshine of prosperity, and to have entered on a new career of happiness and favour. Mrs. Vincent certainly was still troubled with a few pricks of envy, as she watched the two brown heads of Dolly and Eliza bent over their needlework, and remembered that this fine house, with all it contained, would pass into the hands of a young lady she had once denominated a minx; still, even she had by this time schooled herself to the inevitable, and determined to be as amiable as the natural acidity of her temper would allow. It had therefore something of the effect of a thunderbolt when Uncle Vincent, in riding-gaiters, with splashed clothes and a heightened colour, burst into the room, and exclaimed, in loud, imprudent tones:

‘Here’s a pretty kettle of fish!’

Dolly and Eliza looked up in amused astonishment. Mrs. Vincent dropped her work, and Mrs. Carrol, fearing some calamity, laid a trembling hand on the edge of the large marble-topped table, while Dick, still holding his cigar behind him, moved a step forward.

‘What do you think these d——d Tories have done?’

‘What?’ cried every one at once.

‘Oh, Vincent, I thought from your face there had been a death,’ gasped Granny, who now turned quite pale.

‘Look! just look!’ Uncle Vincent held a flaming red

poster in his hand. 'They are placarded everywhere, the town is swarming with 'em, they have broken out like summer blisters—it's all up with you, Dick, I expect.'

'What is it?'

Dick now dropped his cigar and strode into the room. He seized the placard, of which Aunt Vincent's keen glance had already gained a fair idea, read it, and looked around at the party with stupid staring eyes.

'What is it, Dick?' asked Granny, in her soft, gentle voice.

'It is an insult—a lie,' said Dick hotly. 'I must go and see about it at once.'

'My dear boy, don't fret; perhaps it's only an election squib,' said Granny.

'It is worse than that—it's a formal accusation.'

'Who accuses you—and of what?' she said quickly.

'Well, it's deuced nasty. I must say,' remarked Uncle Vincent; 'they call him a thief; there's no mistake about it, it is all plump and plain.'

'Such a thing must be actionable,' objected Granny. 'How can they dare——'

'At election time people dare all.'

'Perhaps it is true; what have you done, Dick?' said Aunt Vincent quietly.

'True!'

Dick gave his aunt a look which, had she been more sensitive, must have withered her, and fled from the room, followed by Uncle Vincent. The red placard lay on the floor, where Dick had thrown it. Aunt Vincent picked it up and read it carefully; then suddenly looking round she exclaimed:

'Dolly—Eliza, good gracious! run, get salts and eau de Cologne, and call the servants—be quick, d'ye hear—don't you see—Granny has fainted!'

CHAPTER XX.

AMONGST CHIFFONS.

LUCE and her aunt had arrived in London. Lady Eleanor was completely in her element, visiting dressmakers and consulting with *modistes*. She believed herself artistic, and took a commensurate pride in her presumably fine and accurate taste: in reality she only succeeded in being eccentric and extravagant. A deep colour, a tinge of gold, a barbaric combination, gave

her extreme delight, and she indulged her predilections at her ease.

Luce, as simple in her ideas as she was modest in the estimate of her own looks, fairly winced under the suggestions her aunt authoritatively threw out. The thickly carpeted show-rooms, in which silks and satins hung invitingly and negligently over the backs of chairs, gave her a shudder; the hush and air of absorption that reigned around, as if in all the world there was nothing more important than the choice of a dress, inspired her with a sense of chill. Madame Mousseline, the obsequious milliner, with keen eyes glancing from one to the other, as only a Frenchwoman can, to catch the unexpressed thought in the countenance, disgusted her, while she felt genuine pity for the shallow-faced, languid girls, with frizzled hair and long trains, that moved slowly to and fro, their languor evaporating as soon as they entered the passage, where they quarrelled and snarled at each other in shrill angry tones, or grumbled at the stern orders of Monsieur, whose business it was to enforce obedience. Madame was all sweetness, except in Monsieur's unavoidable absence, when she was found to be as sharp in her tongue as her spouse himself. Luce, the unwilling cause of hurry or discord in the establishment, felt as though all these young girls, with their hard, joyless lives, were being offered up a holocaust on the altar of her own selfishness. She positively hated dress, hated it on account of its own intrinsic unimportance, and also because she had been surfeited with it from childhood, on the principle of the pastrycook's boy, who cannot bear the sight of tarts. But the sympathy on such matters, which Lady Eleanor, with every good intention, could not conjure up a spark of in her impassive niece, she found largely in Maud Hardfast, who took a lively interest in everything connected with *chiffons*. Maud, at first struck dumb with fury and disappointment when she read the letter conveying the news of Luce's engagement, which Lady Eleanor had lost no time in imparting to her dear Mrs. Hardfast, had suffered deeply, and a scene of bitter tears and recrimination took place between mother and daughter.

'My dear Maud, I told you all along you were a failure—your day is over,' said Mrs. Hardfast, laying down the letter with an air of vindictive asperity.

'I haven't a rich aunt and Highview Castle at my back. Everyone thinks Luce is an heiress,' responded Maud bitterly.

'I can do no more for you, my dear, and I fear your looks are rapidly going. The price of coals, too, has risen, and it is impossible for me to give you another new gown at present.'

'I don't want a new gown,' said Maud snappishly. She had been tormenting her mother to give her a lovely blue plush with feather trimming, which she had seen at Madame Mousseline's, and it argued a piece of refined cruelty on Mrs. Hardfast's part to deny her the gown, at the same time that she reproached her with the loss of her good looks. It meant that she was to consider herself on the retired list, take second rank as an ex-beauty, and a matrimonial failure.

'If, at least, you could bring young Sterney to the point,' pursued Mrs. Hardfast calmly; 'but they tell me he is quite infatuated with the new American actress; and it is certainly a week since he has been to see you.'

Maud sighed. She would do anything, anything in reason, she would be deterred by no meanness, could she but secure a husband. But man-hunting is even more precarious and quite as difficult as boar-hunting; more especially because a girl cannot announce her intention of starting for the chase, but must pretend innocence and indifference. It was five o'clock when Lady Eleanor's letter arrived. The little tea-table was drawn up near the fire, the reading-lamp, covered with a pink shade, threw a pleasant glimmer around; a muffin simmered in its hot dish; the silver kettle crowed murmurously over a spirit-lamp. Maud's hair was neatly coiled in waves of gold, and glistened warmly in the firelight, and Mrs. Hardfast, in the low armchair, plump and still good looking, formed an agreeable picture in her tight-fitting tailor gown.

An ignorant observer might have called the scene a family idyl, yet dark vindictive thoughts filled Maud's heart, and cold and selfish calculation oppressed the matronly bosom of her mother. That evening Maud lighted her two bedroom candles (she was used to four, but from motives of economy she had been lately reduced to two very poor specimens of glaring spermaceti) and contemplated her face earnestly in the glass with the critical acumen of an artist, rather than the indulgent tenderness of a vain and pretty woman. 'There is not a wrinkle,' she said to herself with satisfaction, 'not a grey hair; my eyes are bright, my colour as clear as ever; a little pencilling might improve my eyebrows, and a dash of lip-salve my lips, but otherwise I am very well, and if I cannot wheedle a man out of his name and fortune, I should like to know who can.' She retired to bed with a light heart and slept as peacefully as the veriest child. The next day she wrote a gushing and affectionate note to dear Lady Eleanor, and, on the arrival of the latter in town, made a point of calling upon her im-

mediately. She found Lady Eleanor surrounded with patterns of stuffs, and Luce in the corner trying to read a book.

‘Come here, my dear!’ cried Lady Eleanor, overjoyed to find a listener, ‘come here; now give me your candid opinion: do you prefer this delicate rose, or that exquisite blue, and shall the dress have a *col à la Medicis* or be draped *à la Watteau*?’ Maud sat down and argued the point out carefully, exhaustively, with the profound interest of a connoisseur. Lady Eleanor was delighted. ‘What a treasure you are, my dear; stay and dine with us; we are going to the theatre, we can easily squeeze you into our box; and you needn’t dress, you are charming just as you are.’

‘I am afraid I must run away and tell mamma,’ said Maud, prettily apologetic, ‘and get a pair of gloves; she can ask Cousin Jemima to sit with her, you know, if she feels lonely, only I must give her time; I will be back directly.’

And Maud ran off. When she reached home she merely put her head in at the dining-room where Mrs. Hardfast, who expected no visitors, was sitting in a flannel dressing-gown over a very small fire, with the *débris* of a cup of servants’ tea, and a thick slice of bread and butter, before her.

‘I’m going out!’ cried Maud, ‘to dine with Lady Eleanor; send Jones upstairs please and lend me your sable cloak.’

Mrs. Hardfast serenely rang the bell, gave the desired order, and, remarking that a cut of cold meat from the servants’ supper, and a glass of ~~warm~~ whisky and water, would be all she should require, as Miss Maud did not dine at home, resumed her interrupted nap, and dozed off into a dream of bliss, in which she saw herself mother-in-law to a duke. Maud soon returned to Lady Eleanor’s house looking most captivating in a soft evening dress of pale blue stuff, cosily covered by her mother’s sable cloak.

Lady Eleanor said in a pleased tone, ‘Why, child, you have dressed and look very nice:’ and Luce, who wore a plain black gown, and later in the evening sat in the back of the box, was entirely eclipsed by her friend’s radiance. Mr. Sterney and Lord Gossamer, an elderly man, who were of the party, addressed all their remarks to Maud; and Arthur Sterney, for the evening, forgot the American actress and her wonderful antics. After this Lady Eleanor used to send every day for Maud. Either a little queer twisted note scrawled in pencil invited her to lunch, or the carriage came to fetch her to the dress-maker’s, where her presence was required, or Luce would herself appear, armed with an urgent message from her aunt.

These visits generally resulted in something agreeable for Maud ; she was taken to theatres, and to supper afterwards, and a gown which Lady Eleanor had intended for Luce was bestowed upon her, or she was solaced with a dozen pairs of gloves or a pretty fan, as a reward for her good nature and amiability. The latter, usually considered a virtue, in this instance was so decidedly an exotic, cultivated with care and attention, that it might rather be classed as a vice, twin-sister to that most subtle enemy of the human race, dissimulation. Maud played her cards well certainly, and duly received her recompense. Luce had at first felt a little afraid of her, fearing angry reproaches ; but when she discovered that Maud smiled kindly, that her words were affectionate and generous, and her claws, if she had any, sheathed in velvet and carefully kept out of sight, she warmed towards her, and innocently prattled of her prospects and her lover.

‘ You know, Maud, I felt a little ashamed of myself at first,’ she said one day, as the two girls washed their hands amicably in Luce’s bedroom ; ‘ I fancied you might think I had flattered Dick, or manœuvred to catch him, but, if you knew, it all came about so simply and——’

‘ And charmingly, you Arcadian ; why it is a very nice marriage for everybody ; he is amazingly good-looking, though perhaps he will get too stout by-and-by, and you are sure to be very rich ; it is an excellent match.’

‘ An excellent match !’ the happy smile died away on Luce’s lips ; ‘ why I haven’t a sixpence ; my uncle only took me in out of charity, and Dick doesn’t want money—indeed, personally I should prefer to be poor, provided Dick could have all his comforts.’

‘ Well, my dear, everyone calls you an heiress (just lend me your brush, will you ? thanks ! what a nice brush, the bristles are so long), and of course Mr. Carrol has heard what everyone says.’

‘ An heiress !’ Luce sat down aghast on the edge of her bed.

‘ Why, you are not going to faint, are you ? I wish somebody would call *me* an heiress, shouldn’t I have a lot of offers then, and shouldn’t I lead them a dance, just—Luce, you are a little fool !’

‘ I assure you, Maud,’ said Luce seriously, ‘ you are entirely mistaken in your ideas, and Mr. Carrol must certainly be aware of the truth ; the settlements will show that.’

‘ Ah yes, of course, the settlements,’ said the other girl, laughing, and lifting the hand holding the ivory hairbrush so as

to display the curves of her graceful figure ; 'but then he hadn't seen the settlements when he proposed to you—he could only guess.'

'If I thought——' Luce rose suddenly, setting her mouth with fixed determination.

'You wouldn't make a scene ? Why, my dear, you're the luckiest girl in the world ; you'll have lots of money and the man you love. Why, of course I saw through you at once. You were in love, abjectly, meanly in love, with Dick Carrol from the very beginning.'

Luce hid her face.

'All men are mercenary, dear—that's nothing new.'

'And what are women, pray ?' said Luce, lifting her large, sad eyes.

'What men make them,' promptly answered Maud, with a harsh laugh. 'Don't you think I would be good, and innocent, and stupid, as you are, dear, if I could afford it—but I can't. I have got a certain game to play, and I try to play it to the best of my ability. You must fight men with their own weapons, if you wish to succeed. If they cheat you, you must cheat them in return.'

'What a horrible world it is !'

'Not a bit horrible when one has plenty of money.'

Dick also had once called it a horrible world, but then he regarded it from quite another point of view ; it was horrible to *him*, because he opposed his own will to the inevitable, and beat himself hopelessly against an iron fate. It was horrible to *her*, because she found deceit and treachery, where her heart longed to trust and love with all a woman's power of absolute self-devotion.

'Why do you say such things ?'

'Because they are true. I've no patience with people who try to throw dust in their own eyes. Tell *yourself* the truth, even if no one else cares to do it. I'll be bound you can tell yourself harder truths than any other person. There are certain corners in one's own mind, certain little sins and weaknesses, that are hidden from one's dearest friends, but that *we* know—you and I—about each other respectively. I make myself no illusions ; you had better do the same. Illusions are the most expensive things in the world ; they cost no end of time and money, and in the end they always give way and let you down with a nasty jarring flop.'

Luce did not answer. Possibly there might be some truth in Maud's jeering words, she thought ; and yet, if it were so,

could she bear to part with her illusions? She decided that she could not. Life's young ideals are more precious than life, for what is life worth without ideals? and youth stripped of the accompaniment of happy anticipations is only premature old age. Luce felt years younger than Maud, primed with her precocious wisdom.

'I'm very glad I was brought up as I was,' continued Maud reflectively; 'what a mistake it is to keep girls from all contact of real life, believing poverty to be a thing of soups and flannel and condescending charity; love an affair of two superlatively romantic hearts, instead of a matter of digestion or temperament: for, in the first place, love is never mutual; it is impossible to keep two people for long exactly at the same pitch of fever heat; and as for truth, that's entirely comparative, and depends upon the accepted notion of society at the moment. Men don't cheat at cards, but they always lie to women. I suppose a little puritan like you would think that wrong? yet they all do it. I even defy the most sober and faithful of husbands not to indulge in a sly flirtation if he got the opportunity, say at Boulogne, or in the Highlands, or somewhere where he would have no chance of being found out.'

'Don't, pray don't, Maud!' cried Luce, putting her hands to her ears. 'I don't want to hear any more.'

'Why not? Is it necessary to appear in all one's naked truth before the world? Need mamma say she dyes her pretty brown hair, or I tell you that my gown is turned? and that I dust the drawing-room because we don't keep a regular housemaid? or that I improve my figure, or anything of that kind? Stuff! everyone knows there must be some kind of pretence in the world, only the pretence lies in pretending you don't make a pretence. There is the difference between you and me—I'm natural, you're not.'

Luce, her heart smarting with the pin-pricks Maud had been so lavishly showering upon her during the last few moments, jumped up and declared she would not stay any longer, and at that instant Lady Eleanor's voice was heard calling up the stairs, 'Luce! Maud! girls, *do* come down at once; I want you *directly*.'

The girls flew down. Lady Eleanor held a telegram in her hand, and appeared discomposed.

'What is it?' said Maud, sidling up to her affectionately. 'Won't Madame Mousseline agree to your terms, or has she sent home a horror of a misfit?'

'Much worse than that,' said Lady Eleanor gravely, keeping

her eye the while on Luce ; ' Dick Carrol has got into trouble. I don't know what it is—something to do with the election, I believe—but Mr. Highview begs that we will return immediately.'

'What a nuisance !' said Maud quickly ; 'and you had asked some people to dine to-morrow, can't you put it off?'

'Impossible ! Mr. Highview does not explain, but he talks of criminal proceedings.'

Luce gave a gasp, and suddenly sat down.

CHAPTER XXI.

A STUDENT'S COUNSEL.

BRUCE meanwhile having plunged deeply into his studies, which his visit to Highview had somewhat interrupted, heard nothing of these exciting events. He was just now particularly engaged taking notes at the British Museum, and was absent from home the greater part of the day, much to Mrs. Flinks's curiosity, who confided to the long-suffering Eves that she thought he had embarked upon a love affair. 'He's such a quiet gentleman,' said Eves, 'taint in nature likely with him.'

'The quiet ones are the worst ; poor dear Mr. Flinks couldn't say "bo" to a goose, but he was deep and sly, and after his death I read all his papers, and found out such dreadful things.'

'And knowing that, you're always hankering after the men?'

'Well, bad as they are,' the widow laughed, 'life's but a dull business without them.'

'It's a tough business with them,' answered Eves sententiously.

'You are an old marplot,' said her mistress cheerfully ; 'you haven't a bit of "go" in you, or you wouldn't pass all your life washing up dishes.'

'Washing up in peace is a trifle better than being cuffed over the head by a man who has a legal right to get drunk, and make you work for him.'

'Oh, if you are that kind of woman I've nothing to say ; I should like to see any one cuff *me*,' the widow tossed her head coquettishly. Needless to say that when that afternoon Dick Carrol drove up in a hansom, carrying a small bag in his hand, the lively widow flew to open the door, and received him with familiar *empressement*.

'Bruce out?' said Dick soberly, scarcely looking at the landlady, and seeming weary and harassed.

'He will be in this evening, I suppose?'

'Then I'll wait. He tossed the cabman his fare and walked in, while the landlady smiling and talking sought to conduct him into her sitting-room.

'There is a fire here, and the newspaper,' she said. 'Mr. Bruce does not keep up his fire now, as he is out all day, and you might find it chilly. Shall I bring you some tea and a muffin? I've very nice muffins—I think you have tasted them already.'

'No, thank you; I don't want any tea, and I'll go straight to Mr. Bruce's room.'

'As you please, sir,' said the landlady, nettled.

Dick sat down in the leather arm-chair by the table, as usual littered with the student's books and papers, and laid his aching head on his crossed arms. Mrs. Flinks, finding him hopelessly silent, departed, sending up the faithful Eves, who soon struck a light and made a brisk little fire. The dull January day neared its close; the acrid air, yellow and fog-laden, seemed heavy and oppressive to Dick, whose lungs were accustomed to breathe the fresh country atmosphere; the room had a dis-used, cold, and uncomfortable look. Generally untidy, the furniture poor and common, and somewhat frayed and old as it was, yet with Bruce present, his pipe and his talk, it had never seemed dull, nor had Dick previously experienced the feeling of chill and gloom which now oppressed him. He was sorry he had refused the landlady's tea, or rather he wished he had something stronger, something that would warm his chilly blood. He remembered his bag, seized, opened it, and found therein to his delight a small flask containing brandy. He drank some and felt better. So much better that he dragged the arm-chair nearer the fire, ensconced himself more comfortably, took out his cigar-case, and began to smoke. He was already in a more genial frame of mind when Bruce, slowly climbing the stairs, turned the handle of the door and discovered him reading an old newspaper by the light of a bit of candle he had found on the chimney-piece.

'Dick! I'm glad to see you. Have you been here long, and why are you sitting in the dark? Let me ring for the lamp,' he said, holding out his hand, while he clasped some fat books to his breast with the other. 'And how goes the election? The eventful day is approaching, I suppose; I know nothing, remember, for you haven't had the grace to write to me lately.'

'Bruce, old fellow,' said Dick hoarsely, 'I'm in an awful mess, I want you to help me.'

Bruce stared.

'What—not another woman?'

'Much worse than that. I thought things were as bad as they could be then, but this is infinitely worse. I shall be disgraced, ruined.'

'Disgraced, ruined—what do you mean?'

Bruce put down the books, divested himself of his greatcoat and hat, and drew a chair beside his friend. Dick spoke in a slow hollow voice utterly unlike his own, and lay back, gloomily looking up to the ceiling, and avoiding Julian's eyes.

'I mean what I say: the most extraordinary things have occurred; everything is against me: I'm trapped, hedged in, done for. I feel dazed and stupid. I can't tell you how it has all come about, for I scarcely know myself. I only know that unless something can be done, and directly, I am downright ruined.'

'You have told me nothing as yet—what is it?'

'There's a warrant out against me for theft, for obtaining money under false pretences—I—Julian, it's a knockdown blow.'

Julian laughed. And the laugh did more good to his poor friend than the brandy, or the cigar, or any amount of common place sympathy and commiseration could have afforded.

'You, Dick? it is a practical joke, I suppose. Why do you look so serious about it?'

'A practical joke! I wish it were. It is serious—most serious. Do you think I could joke on such a subject?'

And yet Dick felt that what presented itself in so risible a fashion to Bruce could scarcely be as grave a matter as he had imagined.

'Well, but this theft, why are you accused of it?'

'From political motives, I suppose; personal spite too, who knows?'

'Then it is?'

'Sir Hilary Fenchurch.'

'I presume you can easily clear yourself?'

'Appearances are deucedly against me.'

'But the motive, my dear fellow, always seek the motive; what motive could *you* have had?'

'They found a cause for that too.'

'Indeed!' Bruce's eyes lost their far-off look, the pupils dilated, he became as interested as in the hunt after some recondite bit of knowledge calculated to throw clear light upon the darkened pathway of historical research. 'You say?'

'Well, it seems St. Hilary gave his wife a pearl necklace, which she took to her jewellers at West Thorpe to get mended; she had broken it, and wished her husband not to know this. Stupid fool that I was! I undertook to deliver the necklace, forgot all about it, left it in my pocket, and it can't be found. On explanation, the jewellers said I had called for it, and of course I am responsible.'

'I am afraid you are indeed. How could you be so careless?'

'I cannot think. Then it turned out that Lady Fenchurch confessed to having met me on that day, and having told me she had left the necklace, and——'

'The jeweller was mistaken, that is all. He must know that you would not take a pearl necklace. What object could you possibly have?'

'Unfortunately a racehorse of mine broke down just about that time. I had some heavy bets to pay, and the supposition is that I took the necklace to pay the bets.'

'I confess this appears extremely unlikely; but of course you know what became of it?'

'I must have lost or else it was taken by one of the servants; I won't accuse them; besides, it may have been jerked out of my pocket.'

Bruce stroked his chin. 'But the obtaining money under false pretences, how do they make that out?'

'Easily enough. I cashed a cheque of my aunt's a day or two afterwards.'

'She gave it you of course,' put in Bruce eagerly.

'She did not. My uncle gave it me, but he says he does not remember it.'

'Your uncle! Impossible! A strange lapse of memory.'

'Isn't it? My aunt always hated me.'

'It's unnatural, unheard of: well, you must defend yourself. Truth will be made plain.'

'You forget—the warrant.'

'Is of no avail against an innocent man.'

'But I have not proved my innocence.'

'The deuce! must a man be thought guilty till he is proved innocent?'

'The long and short of it is, that I may be locked up in jail any day, and the mere disgrace of that, even if I prove my innocence, is enough to brand me for life.'

'And Miss Luce, what does she say?'

'Luce! Oh, I had forgotten her. Poor dear, she is well rid of me; of course this breaks her engagement.'

'I cannot see that ; if she is a true woman she will love you all the better for your misfortunes.'

'Even if that were so, her people would not allow it. You can't think what a state the county is in ; there are placards stuck about everywhere, "Who stole the pearl necklace?" "Vote for Sir Hilary Fenchurch, the honest man!" and squibs and pictures ; it was a great card they played. I can never go near the place again ; I hurried away and came here, and you will let me stay a bit, old fellow, won't you, till I know how the land lies. I knew I could trust you. I knew *you* wouldn't turn against me.'

Bruce rose, took one of Dick's hands, which hung limply over the edge of the chair, and pressed it warmly. 'Certainly, you can trust me.'

He walked away a few paces, strangling the lump that seemed to rise in his throat, coughed once or twice, then returning said in a cheerful tone, 'Well, we will have some dinner at any rate ; I have an enormous appetite, and I dare say you have not eaten much to-day.'

Dick shook his head dolefully. Eves was then promptly summoned. She brought in the lamp, and laid the tablecloth, which presently gave a more lively aspect to the room, while Bruce, slipping on his beloved and shabby grey jacket, tried by appearing unconcerned and cheerful to raise his friend's spirits. Thanks to the food, which though plain was excellently cooked, and the warmth, and the genial kindness and affection which was evident through all the student's clumsy and innocent efforts to please and cheer, Dick gradually recovered some of his ordinary light-heartedness, and soon was able to talk with more ease and equanimity.

Bruce inquired after old Mrs. Carrol.

'Poor dear, she was in bed when I left,' said Dick tenderly ; 'all this knocked her up, and Aunt Vincent would scarcely let me enter her room to say good-bye. She watched over her like a dragon, whispering to me as I went in, "Now mind, if you excite your grandmother, you will *kill* her. You had better not have her death on your shoulders with all the rest."'

'And what did your grandmother say ?'

'Very little ; she squeezed my hand hard, and looked at me with her kind old eyes, and when I was going out she said, "God bless you, Dick !" I wouldn't have pained her for the world—poor, poor old Granny !' Dick buried his face in his hands.

'She trusts you, Dick, or she wouldn't have said, "God bless you ;" take heart.'

'I have been ungrateful, I know, and taken her money without any thanks, and let her think of me, and plan and stint herself in her little fancies and luxuries, to save for me ; but never ! no, Julian, never would I have stolen her money, or cheated my aunt !'

'Of course not ; nobody who knows you believes it.'

'I think Aunt Vincent does, really ; but how that maudlin ass, my uncle, could say he forgot—I can't account for it.'

'I can—his wife's influence. You have often told me he was afraid of her.'

'Yes ; he stood in mortal fear—pah ! isn't it contemptible ?'

'Human nature, at its worst, *is* contemptible ; the more wonder that we care so much as we do for the opinion of the many.'

'I can't philosophise : honestly, I do care awfully what people say of me. How do you think Luce will take it ?'

'You have written to her ?'

'Not a line ; I didn't know what to say. She will believe me guilty like the rest, and Lady Eleanor is as proud as a peacock.'

'You should have asked her to trust you.'

'What ! against appearances ?'

'Certainly—you asked me.'

'But you are a man, and my friend.'

'Believe me, if you do trust a woman, trust her thoroughly ; put her on her honour ; appeal to her fine feelings ; she will always rise to the occasion. I think, myself, that Miss Luce will prove your staunchest ally.'

'I could not ask a girl to go against the wishes of her people, it wouldn't be fair ; and what have I got to offer her ? You know as well as I do that, though nominally my grandmother's heir, everything is in her own power. She may leave me a beggar—it will not be Mrs. Vincent's fault if she doesn't—disgraced, ruined. Why should a woman care even to speak to me again ?'

'Not all women, I grant you, but some might, a small minority ; and I believe Miss Luce to be in that minority.'

'She is unselfish enough for anything, but she would be a fool to stick to me now. If I get out of this affair I shall emigrate to Australia—try to be forgotten——'

'Meanwhile, Sir Hilary walks over for the county ; how about all your political aspirations, your plans of usefulness ?'

'Every man for himself. I must think of myself now.'

'Have you retired, then, from the contest ?'

'I have done nothing ; I left it all to my agent.'

'And he will fill his pockets ?'

'Very likely ; I don't care.' Dick relapsed into gloom.

'And because Sir Hilary, a fond and foolish old man, gratifies a bit of jealous spite (jealous love for his wife is at the bottom of all this, I'll be bound — wasn't the Trojan war kindled for a woman's sake?), your nineteenth-century Helen spoils an election.'

'And a man's whole prospects in life.'

'Exactly. It is the same thing—quality the same, quantity differs. Well, because of this fit of spite, justifiable enough in electioneering times, you are going to give up everything, hurry to the dogs, and cry *Peccavi* !'

'I can't help myself.'

'Was there ever an incurable ill ? Death is the only irrevocable thing, and all philosophers are agreed that death is not an evil—a mere state of transition.'

'I feel as if I could cut my throat !'

'To-day—and to-morrow when the sun shines, and Miss Luce writes you a pretty letter, and the accusation falls to the ground, you will wish to live for ever.'

'Pooh ! you don't understand.'

'Yes, I do.' Bruce's voice grew low and mellow. 'I have had a hard life myself ; have known poverty and struggles and disappointments. I have the nervous temperament which, sometimes lifted above the earth, innumerable times falls heavily back in miserable depression, the dyspeptic tendencies of the student who neglects his digestion, and grudges himself the luxury of fresh air. I have few friends, and no protection or interest ; for all love and family ties I have an old mother, who is plain and dowdy and antiquated and frail enough to die any day, but who is sacred and perfect in my eyes because of her belief in and affection for me ; and yet, though I am poor, and forced to work hard, and have no particular prospects, I never wish to die. I am worse off than you, and yet *you* talk of dying.'

'To live disgraced is unbearable.'

'Why should you live disgraced ? This cloud will pass away. You will learn to smile as you think of your distress to-day. Now, Dick, sleep it off ; here is a bed-candle. You will speak differently to-morrow.'

And yet, when Dick reluctantly retired in search of the slumbers his exhausted mental and physical nature required so urgently, Julian Bruce, moving with the cautious quiet steps of

a careful woman, sat far into the night, planning, thinking, and writing letters. He had succeeded in restoring in some degree his friend's courage, but at the bottom of his own heart he was terribly anxious.

CHAPTER XXII.

BACK AGAIN AT HIGHVIEW.

LADY ELEANOR invited Maud to accompany her on the return to Highview Castle, and the latter, who was glad of an opportunity for a junket, and ready for any agreeable emergency, gladly consented. Who could tell what might not result? she might make some desirable acquaintance, might render herself so necessary to Lady Eleanor as to induce that great lady to adopt, or at least chaperone, her, throw the glamour of her magnificent presence and countenance around her, and cause people, in the fact of her ladyship's bosom friend, to forget the existence of penniless Miss Hardfast. Maud believed in the power of the unforeseen. Pleasant things must be in store for her, and the unexpected would resolve into the desirable. So Maud joyfully packed her trunks, kissed her mother without great regret, leaving her to a serious study of the house bills, and a deep consideration of the way in which expenses could be still further cut down and a few disagreeable creditors disposed of, and departed with her maid for the stately regions of Highview Castle. The three ladies travelled in a compartment specially reserved, which an affable guard, duly tipped with a half-crown, locked and unlocked with enormous ceremony. In the next carriage sat the two maids and the footman, chatting merrily and sucking oranges to while away the time. The footman got out at every station to inquire if her ladyship required anything, and her ladyship usually did require something. Once it was a newspaper, precisely the one she wished for having been omitted from the pile on her lap; once it was some water for Squib, the little-toy terrier, who had barked himself hoarse out of the window at the hedges and trees as they flew past; once it was to send a telegram to Mr. Highview, and once to get the hot-water tin refilled. Lady Eleanor was nervous, and her nerves found vent in extra fidgetiness and exactions. She was ignorant of what awaited her, and she resented her ignorance. Mr. Highview merely telegraphed to her to return; he had omitted to explain any-

thing, and satisfied none of her legitimate curiosity. She was not accustomed to be ordered about in such fashion, and she chafed at her helplessness. Luce leant back in a corner, very quiet and very silent; and Maud, on whom fell the whole burden of entertainment, sought in vain to arrest Lady Eleanor's attention by little stories or allusions to the news and scandal contained in the papers.

'So I see Mrs. Lovejoy is to be married at last. Poor Colonel Jones!'

'I wonder if Mr. Highview will have remembered to send the carriage—ten to one he has forgotten,' sighed Lady Eleanor.

'Just listen, is not this a delicious description of the dress the Princess wore——'

'Criminal proceedings! what can that mean, Maud? I thought a criminal was some low kind of creature—like a tramp or a navvy.'

'Let me see, there was Tichborne,' said Maud, reflectively, 'and Warren Hastings; I read something about him in history——'

'History! that's all over and done with. There are no great criminals now—everything is vulgar and commonplace. And how a gentleman, heir to a large fortune, could have found it necessary to do anything wrong—I mean vulgarly wrong—(peccadilloes, little fashionable *esclandres*, don't count)—what do you think, Luce?'

'I don't think anything—we must wait till we know the facts.'

'That is so like you, Luce'—Lady Eleanor drew her furs closer with a pettish movement; you always talk like a professor of logic—"till we know the facts"—why we can't wonder when we *know*, of course—but then you are dreadfully impassive.'

'You must make allowances for Luce,' whispered Maud in Lady Eleanor's ear; 'she is *so* fond of him, you know.'

Luce heard the whisper, and shrank within herself.

'It was very inconsiderate of Mr. Highview,' proceeded Lady Eleanor querulously; 'there is the trousseau half ordered, and what the tradespeople will think of my sudden departure, leaving them all to their own devices, I am sure I can't imagine.'

'You can write to them when you arrive.'

'Of course, no one ever minds what trouble I am put to,' said Lady Eleanor crossly.

'I will write the letters, dear Lady Eleanor.'

'Upon my word you are a very obliging girl, Maud. Pray hold Squib for a few minutes; he scratches holes with his little paws in my fur.' Maud held Squib, and was forced to put up

gracefully with the havoc he soon made of the sable cloak she had prudently taken with her.

The carriage had not been forgotten ; another footman met Lady Eleanor at the station, and when the train stopped handed her a note from her husband. The note was very short and unsatisfactory, and told her only that the writer had ridden into West Thorpe on business, and would be back about six o'clock. 'Four o'clock only !' said Lady Eleanor, consulting her watch ; 'we shall have two hours more to wait before we know what it's all about. Yes, drive on, Jenkins ; there is nothing else.'

Lady Eleanor found the drawing-room looking as beautiful as ever. The palms had even grown a little, Maud declared, and sweet-smelling hyacinths and narcissi filled the *jardinières* and silver vases on the tables.

'Mould is not a bad gardener,' said Lady Eleanor, looking round complacently ; 'here, Luce, do you see, that is the very pale pink camellia we admired at Lady Prankish's. Why, where's the child ?'

'Gone upstairs, I think,' said Maud quietly ; 'she is nervous and upset.'

'Nervous !' sneered Lady Eleanor ; 'girls in *my* day didn't know the meaning of nerves.'

'Ah, but you are different ; there are not many people like *you*.'

Somewhat mollified, her ladyship read her letters, examined the bill of fare, rang for the housekeeper, and gave her sundry orders, then drank tea and ate heartily of buttered cake, after which she felt equal to meeting Mr. Highview, and hearing a full, true, and particular account of all that had occurred.

Mr. Highview dismounted at the stables, and hurried quickly into his wife's sitting-room, where he found her sitting with Maud over the tea-table.

'Shall I go ?' said Maud alertly, jumping up.

'Certainly not, my dear ; I look upon you quite as one of the family ; you can hear everything.'

Maud subsided into her chair with a smile—she certainly had every intention of hearing what was to be said.

'A most unlucky affair—upset me extremely. I'm very glad you are home again,' said Mr. Highview, embracing his wife : the latter could not afford time to be affectionate.

'You have alarmed us all most dreadfully—quick—don't lose a moment, and tell us.'

Mr. Highview proceeded to explain, Lady Eleanor interrupting him every moment with questions and exclamations.

‘Did he really steal the necklace?’ she asked, dropping her voice mysteriously.

‘Certainly not. I do not believe it for an instant.’

‘But appearances are sadly against him.’

‘Well, it has lost him the election ; a very mean trick on the part of his opponents, I must say.’

‘And disagreeable for Luce.’

‘Poor Luce ! By the way, where is she ? I hope the dear child hasn’t taken it terribly to heart.’

‘Pooh ! She’s very well quit of such a wretch. Of course the engagement is over ?’

‘Had we not better wait ?’

‘Wait—when the young man is under a cloud. You have no consideration for your niece.’

‘Well, I am sure, my dear,’ excusing himself, ‘I only wish to do what is best—the poor girl must not be made unhappy.’

‘A marriage that does not come off is no great affair, and in this case not an ounce of blame can attach to the girl—you don’t suppose women generally marry their first lover, do you ? Remember, Luce has only been out one year—she’ll get over this directly, and make just as good a match, I’ll be bound—but the interests of the county will suffer ; you couldn’t stand yourself, could you ?’

‘Certainly not—besides, no one but Sir Hilary has a chance now.’

‘It is most provoking, most provoking.’ Lady Eleanor tapped her heel against the floor, and rested her chin on her hand meditatively.

‘Nothing to be done—nothing—nobody—I *insist* on your standing, Mr. Highview ; it can do no harm, it may do good. We shall have a claim on the Government if you win the election, and perhaps they will make you a peer—come, cheer up, believe me they will listen to you, and you have several days still to spare.’

Maud now slipped from the room and ran upstairs to Luce, whom she found restlessly pacing backwards and forwards.

‘He has come—Mr. Highview has come. Oh, it is dreadful, Luce—Mr. Carrol has stolen a necklace of Lady Fenchurch’s (they always said he admired her, so it was doubly queer), and embezzled money, and he has gone away, and the election is lost, and Lady Eleanor is in such a state.’

‘Gone !’ Only one word seemed to pierce an entrance into Luce’s mind. ‘Gone, did you say, where, not with——?’

‘Not with anyone, you little fool,’ laughed Maud, stealing a

look at herself in the glass. 'Why, he has only made himself scarce, disappeared—very wisely too, while there is such a hue and cry after him. I suppose he will come back some day, but just at present discretion is the better part of valour.'

'Maud, how *can* you laugh—isn't it terrible?'

'I dare say he will clear himself, people exaggerate so; meanwhile, you had better dry your eyes, for there is no chance for you.'

'How do you mean?'

'Lady Eleanor has decided to break off the engagement—I should not be surprised if she has found you another husband already——'

'What? break off the engagement!'

'Yes, you white-faced ninny; don't look so surprised, and open your big eyes; how can you marry a man who is accused of goodness knows what dreadful things?'

'But he is innocent!'

'That we cannot tell—there is a slur upon him now, that even you, dear little fond creature, cannot remove—your love for him will be finely tried, I expect.'

'I shall not change,' said Luce very calmly.

'No; but Lady Eleanor is mistress here, remember.'

'I must see him; I must hear from his own lips what he wishes; I shall not give him up till then,' said Luce passionately.

'Bravo! Luce, I declare you show plenty of courage. But if I were you I would not presume too much upon it; you must give in sooner or later—why struggle?'

'Have you any idea where he is to be found?'

'None whatever, and if I had I should not tell you. There is not a bit of use in stirring up mud.'

'Where can he be—will his grandmother know?' continued Luce, as if to herself; 'poor, poor old lady, it will kill her. O Maud, she was so proud of him, so devoted to him——'

'He certainly seems a nice specimen of a young man——'

'It is some hideous mistake, I am sure. O Maud, dear Maud, do help me to unravel it. Dick is a gentleman; he is incapable of anything mean——'

'He has got a good advocate in you at least,' said Maud, almost roused to admiration of her friend's constancy; 'but it doesn't pay to take up the losing cause—the poor fellow has evidently no luck—just at such a time, too, it was hard lines, I must say——'

'I can't desert him, at any rate.'

‘You, poor dear, I don’t believe you will be consulted.’

‘My uncle is a just man. It is not just to trample on the unfortunate. Besides, if I do not show my trust in Dick, how can I expect it of anyone else. Maud, dear Maud, don’t forsake me at least.’

‘I won’t forsake you,’ answered Maud shortly; ‘but I can’t persuade you into folly.’

‘I will be careful; I will not be foolish. Go down, dear, now—go and talk to my uncle: find out all you can—do, there’s a kind girl;’ then with a pardonable touch of flattery she added, ‘you are so clever, you know.’

Maud departed, and Luce was left alone. She drew near the window, clasped her hands, and looked out into the calm, clear night. She did not falter or hesitate in her thoughts; the path lay distinctly before her. She had now an opportunity of testing her love, of proving the truth of her protestations, of earning the eternal gratitude of the man to whom she was engaged. If she could but gain one kind look, one loving word, she would be amply repaid. Men’s hearts in time of trouble were soft and malleable—she might effect an entrance into Dick’s so complete that no effort could dislodge her. A kind of humble thankfulness filled her soul that she should have been chosen to take the part of comforter. It suited with her gentle nature, tenacious in its gentleness, innocently trustful, unfaltering in its simple faith. The first thing to be done was to place herself in communication with him. But how? He was not at Long Leam. A letter addressed there might lie for an uncertain period forgotten on the table. He was not likely to leave an address with his Uncle Vincent. Where could he be; in which direction was he likely to go for comfort and shelter? As she thus pondered she remembered Bruce. Naturally Dick’s first impulse would be to take refuge with his kind, unworldly friend, to whom ordinary prejudices were as nothing. She must write to Bruce. Drawing pen and ink towards her, she composed her letter.

‘DEAR MR. BRUCE,

‘I have just heard that Mr. Carrol is in some dreadful trouble. I am sure that you, his best friend, are with him. Will you send me his address, and news of his welfare; and assure him, though this is almost unnecessary, that I am truly unhappy, and *entirely* unchanged? Pray forgive my troubling you,

‘And believe me,

‘Yours very truly,

‘LUCE WINDERMERE.’

When the letter was written and stamped, Luce rang for her maid, and desired that it might be sent at once to the post. He must receive the letter to-morrow, and if he had ever doubted her he could doubt no longer. Luce, happy in her trustfulness, astonished her uncle and aunt that evening by the calmness of her behaviour, and her appearance at dinner with an unruffled brow.

'She is a heartless girl,' confided Lady Eleanor to Maud, who scarcely knew what to think, the dignity of sustained resolution being an incomprehensible mystery to her. Mr. Highview, who received Luce's earnest feverish entreaties to be allowed to drive over and visit old Mrs. Carrol on the morrow, thought differently.

'Just lend me the dogcart, uncle—you need not spare me a groom, or I can ride if more convenient.'

'Will it not be painful to you, child?' He hesitated, feeling compassion for the slight young girl going out bravely to her fate. 'Why should you wish it? No one can expect it of you?'

'What! not Granny? (you know I always call her Granny). *She* will expect it. Pray, pray let me go! I shall be far more unhappy if you keep me here.'

Mr. Highview glanced towards his wife. She was busy talking to Maud—they were planning a new table-decoration. He heard Luce's short quick breathing, and noticed her eye, brilliant with feverish impatience.

'Let me go, please!' she said again, with agonized entreaty.

'Very well, dear—start before breakfast. Sultan shall be saddled and ready for you; only I think, perhaps you had better say nothing about it to your aunt.'

Luce thanked him with a silent kiss.

CHAPTER XXIII.

LUCE VISITS GRANNY.

As soon as it was light Luce crept downstairs and went round to the stables. Sultan was ready, champing the bit in his stall—the groom approached, touching his hat. 'I am to go with you, miss, was Mr. Highview's orders.'

'Very well,' said Luce, not displeased at the escort; 'make haste and put me on—I am in a hurry.'

She mounted lightly, and with a bound Sultan left the stable-yard. He snorted with pleasure when he found himself in the

fresh morning air, controlled only by his mistress's light hand, while they cantered along the dewy lanes. The weather had been unusually mild, a spring-like scent of earth and leaves floated in the air, here and there primroses glimmered under the hedges, and busy rooks cawed and fluttered about the freshly ploughed sod. Luce experienced a sense of pleasurable relief—the long easy swing of the horse's stride suited her irritable nerves. She was in action, she was straining towards the desired end, she was doing what he would have wished she was sure; how far preferable to the time she must otherwise have spent waiting helplessly in Lady Eleanor's close, heavily scented drawing-room, while the hours crawled slowly along and no news came. The sixteen miles were accomplished without fatigue to mistress or horse, and Luce rode into the stable-yard at Long Leam as the clock struck ten. At this hour Mrs. Carrol was usually in her sitting-room, alone. Luce could not, she thought, have chosen a more auspicious moment. She dismounted, and walked round to the hall-door. The grey-haired butler smiled and seemed surprised when he saw who was his early visitor.

'Is it you, miss?' he said, with the respectful familiarity of an old retainer.

'Yes. Can I see Mrs. Carrol?' Luce stepped into the hall, which seemed to her dear and homelike.

'Mrs. Carrol!' said the butler hesitatingly; 'not Mrs. Vincent Carrol?'

'No, no—Granny—old Mrs. Carrol.'

'She is in bed,' he said, putting on the conventional visage of woe.

'She is not ill, I hope?'

'Well, I don't rightly know; but no one sees her except Mrs. Vincent; you will have to ask her leave first.'

'Then ask her leave, quick; say I have ridden over on purpose to see Mrs. Carrol, and I cannot go away without speaking to her.'

'I will see what I can do,' said the servant; 'but won't you step into the drawing-room? There's no fire, though, I am sorry to say,' he added, 'but we're all upset like now.'

'I don't want a fire, said Luce, 'I shall stay here; only make haste and give my message.'

How still the house was; the newspapers lay untouched on the table, and the vases were empty of their flowers. The old butler seemed strange too, as if he had forgotten his business.

Mrs. Carrol ill, Dick absent, the terriers no longer running out to greet her, Dick's hats no longer hanging in the hall, or

sounds of whistling and laughter reaching her ears—it was a terrible change. A sensation as of death clutched at her heart in a chill throb of terror—what could it mean, what had happened?

She sat down cold with dread, listening with all her might for some human sound to break the terrible silence. After a few moments the butler returned.

‘Mrs. Vincent says, madam, that old Mrs. Carrol is unable to see any one, but that she will speak to you if you will please to walk upstairs.’

Luce bowed her head and followed the old man silently to Granny’s study. There at Granny’s own table, covered with memoranda and papers, sat Mrs. Vincent in stiffly bristling cap. She scarcely rose as Luce entered. All the chairs were empty now, and the books which used to litter them piled away in a corner. She held out a limp hand.

‘This is an early visit,’ she said dryly; ‘did you not know Granny was ill?’

‘No; I came as soon as I heard——’

‘Of the unfortunate circumstances—very proper and kind of you, I am sure. You were attached to the wretched young man.’

‘Do you mean Dick?’ said Luce warmly; ‘pray do not speak like that, before me.’

‘Ah!’ Mrs. Vincent coldly and severely criticised the slight figure in the dark blue habit; and, looking at the firm pale face and large gleaming eyes before her, she said, after a pause, ‘You are infatuated still, I see. Well, few people expected it. I confess though that Dick Carrol never imposed upon *me*. As for his poor grandmother, the shock and the grief have killed her.’

‘Do you mean she is dying?’ Luce started up.

‘Not exactly, but she is very old, and no one can foresee the consequences. Fortunately I am here; I can take the post of duty, and reconcile her soul to God; she is very restless, and I fear——’

‘Let me go to her, poor, poor Granny!’ Luce put both her hands together entreatingly.

‘It is scarcely possible, I am afraid; she must not be agitated; the sight of a stranger would harm her.’

‘I, a stranger to Granny? You do not know how I love her.’

‘I can make a pretty shrewd guess, I fancy,’ said Mrs. Vincent with a sneer. Luce thought of Granny lying there sad and alone, separated from her only by a door, and nursed by the unsympathetic touch of her daughter-in-law, and her heart yearned towards the old lady.

'I promise not to agitate her,' said Luce quite humbly (Mrs. Vincent was having her revenge, and she thoroughly enjoyed it); 'just let me give her a kiss.'

'A kiss! Do you think that will be of any benefit to her? Poor thing! Her days are numbered. I am just putting a little order into things; latterly she had grown very lax in business matters. I have found frightful extravagance in everything—waste in the servants' hall——'

Luce remembered the butler's apology for the absence of fire in the drawing-room, and supposed that the omission was a part of the new rule of economy.

'Where is your husband?' faltered Luce, who foresaw a dim vista of heartbreaking changes.

'Vincent? Oh, he is gone into West Thorpe to meet Sir Hilary.'

'Sir Hilary!'

'Yes, about the warrant; he is anxious it should be served at once. Vincent very kindly suggested a little delay—in the family, you know, one does not want to be hard—still, it does not do to appear as if one ignored the disgrace that has fallen upon us through the behaviour of this poor misguided man.'

This time Luce did not say, 'Do not speak like that before me.'

Mrs. Vincent's relentlessness, the sternness of miserable facts, crushed the speech out of her; she could only look a silent protest.

'Vincent and I have a great deal to do. All these family disgraces have naturally grieved us extremely. I have sent for the children here, and we shall try to make ourselves valuable to poor Granny while she lives, and to restore the honour of the house as far as that is possible.'

'Where is Dick?' said Luce, in a low voice.

'What! Hasn't he written to you? I suppose he was ashamed; still, that was hard upon you, wasn't it? You were so fond of him.'

Mrs. Vincent smiled unpleasantly, and fixed her cold grey eyes on Luce's face. The girl jumped up; her tender heart resented the hypocritical sorrow which veneered Mrs. Vincent's real feelings of triumph; her cheek flushed, and her voice shook with emotion.

'I think you are very cruel,' she said, 'to gloat over anyone's distress and misery, and to be so ready to believe the worst of your own relations; perhaps some day you may need kindness yourself.'

'Young lady,' said Mrs. Vincent, rising also, 'if you only come to find fault with your elders, I think the sooner you go home the better—shall I ring for your horse?'

Luce promptly recognised the error she had fallen into in allowing her feelings to triumph over her judgment, and, altering her tone, she said:

'Mrs. Vincent, I beg your pardon; but feel for me a little—I am very unhappy, and I should so like to see dear Granny; please don't deny me this favour; it will not hurt her, I promise you.'

'Mrs. Vincent was about to reply in the negative, when a gentle tinkle broke the silence. 'Granny's bell,' said Mrs. Vincent, listening; 'I wonder what she wants; wait a little, I will go and see.'

'Tell her I am here,' urged Luce, as Mrs. Vincent's cap-ribbons fluttered through the doorway.

Presently Mrs. Vincent returned. 'You can go in,' she said, shortly, 'only just for a minute, though; it seems she heard your voice.'

Luce needed no further permission, and glided quickly through the door, which Mrs. Vincent gingerly held half open. Granny's room was shrouded in darkness. Luce waited an instant on the threshold to accustom her eyes to the absence of light, then made her way slowly up to the shadowy four-post bedstead in the corner.

'Granny!'—'Luce!' The loving old arms were tightly clasped round her; the kind old voice murmured a whispered welcome. 'My dear girl, I am so glad, so thankful, you are here.'

'I came as soon as I could; we only arrived from London last night.'

'I knew it, dear. I never doubted your heart.'

'You're not ill, Granny?'

'No, child, not ill; just a little weak and dizzy, when I get up. You see, I'm old; as Mrs. Vincent says, I cannot expect anything else, at my age.'

'Ah, Mrs. Vincent—does she take care of you?'

'Excellent care. She doses me with tonics and soups; my body ought to get strong, but it is the spirit, Luce, that is sick, I'm afraid.'

'Poor Granny!' Luce clasped her protectingly.

'Aunt Vincent says I fret. I suppose it is wrong, but I can't help it. Oh, Luce, my boy—my boy!'

'He is innocent!' said Luce firmly. Granny broke into a sob.

‘Yes, of course ; if they would only believe it.’

‘You mustn’t be ill, Granny. You must get up ; assert yourself ; it would grieve *him*, you know.’

‘Yes ; do you think I could ?’ said the old lady doubtfully.

‘Certainly ; wouldn’t you like some light—what do you do all day in this dark room ?’

‘Nothing. Mrs. Vincent says I must not read. I asked her for Homer. Well, perhaps she was right ; the Greek letters might hurt my eyes ; but Keats or Shakspeare—they couldn’t hurt me, I think, and it is worse to have only your thoughts for company. I think one must be very young to be happy in one’s own society long.’

Luce moved to the window, and threw back part of the shutter. The room faced the south, and a gleam of glorious sunlight burst into the darkened space.

‘It is quite a beautiful day,’ said Luce, ‘and there are snow-drops on the terrace, and the golden yews look like burnished gold. I wish you could go out, Granny.’

‘So do I, but never mind ; tell me some more, Luce ; have the gardeners mowed the lawn ?’

‘Yes, Granny ; it looks as smooth as velvet, and the lake is so still and clear, and I really think the waterfowl seem more lively than ever.’

‘It is a fine place,’ replied Granny, turning on her pillows, ‘and I have tried my best to keep it nice.’

‘It is nice, it’s beautiful ; and do you know I think everything misses you now you are ill. Do try and get up again soon.’

‘Do you think so ?’ Granny opened the calm blue eyes she had shut wearily. ‘Does anyone miss me ? I thought they were just waiting for my death ; I am old, and cumber the ground : I ought to be cut down.’

‘Granny !’ Luce hurried back, knelt down, and kissed the old lady’s hand. ‘We ~~cannot~~ spare you ; you *must* live—for Dick’s sake ; he has no friend but you.’

‘Ah, child, you are right ; and to think that I had forgotten this.’ She smiled sweetly, then a spasm crossed the delicate face, lying white and fair among the big pillows. ‘Where is he—how is he ? Mrs. Vincent will not allow me to speak of him. She says he has disgraced us.’

‘Live, dear Granny, live to be proud of him. I don’t know where he is ; but of this I am sure, he is neither a coward nor a liar ; say you believe it—don’t listen to Mrs. Vincent—she wants your money.’

'Yes—hush!—the old lady looked anxiously round—'she might hear, she has such sharp ears; when I am tired and want to sleep she tries to persuade me to alter my will—but I can't, Luce; only sometimes I feel weary and wish it were all over. You have done me so much good, child; you will come again, won't you, soon?'

'Yes, yes, dear Granny, indeed I will.'

'I think you must go now, or Mrs. Vincent will be suspicious. I wish she were not quite so mistrustful. It is a little trying, but she means well—she means very well. Granny sighed. 'Kiss me, child, kiss me again,' she added fervently; 'there is life in your lips.'

'It is the love at the bottom of my heart, Granny; you feel its warmth—now don't despond.'

'No—but perhaps you had better close the shutter—Aunt Vincent—'

'And shut out all the sunshine when you are so fond of it—no, no, Aunt Vincent shall not keep you in the dark.'

The very last things Luce saw, as she left the room, were Granny's happy calm smile, and the eyes that beamed with gratitude and affection upon her. Fired with new courage she again proceeded to face Mrs. Vincent, whose table was piled higher than ever with bills and papers and cheque-books, into the latter of which she seemed to have made some considerable inroads.

'I don't think Granny is so ill,' said Luce quietly; 'she wants light and sunshine and air, and to be cheered; it is very bad for her to lie like that in the dark.'

'Much light is injurious to the eyes of an old person,' sententiously observed Mrs. Vincent. 'Granny has tried her eyes far too much already with those rubbishy books.'

'But it is so sad and so lonely for her.'

'At her age she should make her peace with God. She is not careful of her soul; she is very lax in her opinions, she reads philosophical works, and books that are not orthodox—'

'Granny is very good,' said Luce, standing firm and erect. 'I don't know what you call orthodox, but I know she is a Christian.'

'And can't bear the Athanasian Creed, and likes to read about Buddhism as if it were the Bible. If she had brought up Dick differently, carefully, without spoiling him, as with God's help, I have brought up all my children, this distress would have been spared her. Quiet and silence are the best medicines for her now.'

‘They will kill her,’ said Luce quickly.

‘Tut, tut, child, you don’t understand. Leave Granny to me ; I shall do my duty.’

‘I am coming back again,’ said Luce, with a touch of defiant firmness. ‘Granny wishes it.’

‘We shall see : if her pulse is higher, or her face flushed, or she does not take her beef-tea as well as usual, you will not be admitted, I warn you.’

Luce made no further observations. To dispute with Mrs. Vincent was like attempting to knock one’s shins against a granite crag—the shins must suffer. She shook hands formally, and descended the stairs. The old butler, looking more grey and shaky than ever, timidly inquired how she had fared.

‘Did you see her, did you see the old lady?’ he asked, with anxious quavering voice.

‘Yes, I saw her,’ Luce answered in her clear treble ; ‘yes—I saw her.’

‘Is she very ill—is she going to *die*?’ he inquired in a whisper.

‘No ; she is better.’

‘Thank God ! Then they,’ pointing with his finger upstairs, ‘will not be masters here just yet.’

‘No, I think not. Be very attentive to Mrs. Carrol ; she must want for nothing with old servants like you.’

‘Bless you, we do what we can for her ; why, we worship the very ground she treads on ; she is a good lady, she is—if anything bad came to her, why the whole parish would turn out like one man and follow her funeral.’

‘That’s right,’ said Luce hopefully ; ‘you ought to appreciate her, for there are not many like her in the world.’

‘You are coming again, miss?’ the old butler said, following her to the door.

‘Oh yes, very soon.’ Then Luce, with the help of her groom, swung herself into the saddle, and trotted off.

It was late in the afternoon when she reached Highview ; she was tired and hungry, for she had had no luncheon.

Mrs. Vincent, in her energetic notions of economy, never remembered the wants of others.

But she was calm and satisfied. She had done her duty, and she had brought a ray of moral sunshine into poor old Granny’s life. Mr. Highview had entreated Lady Eleanor to make no comment on Luce’s absence, and for once she obeyed his wishes and spared the girl. Maud was not so thoughtful ;

she plied Luce with questions, and pretended a vast deal of interest and anxiety. Luce answered the questions as well as she could, and tried to believe as much of the interest as she dared.

CHAPTER XXIV

JULIAN PREACHES PATIENCE.

‘WHAT did I tell you?’ exclaimed Julian Bruce joyfully one fine morning, dangling a letter in front of Dick’s sleepy eyes. Dick was in bed; sorrow promoted sleep in his case, and he rose late, so that Julian usually completed two or three hours’ work before his friend’s waking.

‘What is it, who is it from?’ asked Dick, turning lazily on his elbow.

‘Why, from her, from the woman I believed in,’ said Julian, spreading out the letter which Luce had sent him. Now what did I say? Are you not ashamed of despairing when even a girl trusts you implicitly?’

‘All the worse for her,’ muttered Dick, diving again beneath the bed-clothes.

‘Come, nonsense, rouse yourself; this letter must be answered, and by you.’

‘I am not going to tie up an innocent woman’s life with my wretched existence.’

‘You do not mean to succumb utterly. Surely such a woman is too precious to be lost?’

‘The more precious, the easier things are to lose.’

‘Not a true woman’s heart. Dick, where is your ambition?’

‘Ambition! I haven’t any. At least not your kind of ambition. I can’t see the use of toiling and slaving as you do, frittering away youth, and denying yourself every atom of pleasure for the sake of finding out some stupid bit of history, or of giving lazy people a lecture. The world turns over and over again, and everything rights itself without anyone’s help. Now my ambition is of a different kind. I want to live my own life, troubling no one, and bothered by nobody, and that’s just what seems impossible. It’s awfully hard.’

‘It is the rule of life, no man can live to himself.’

‘Oh, I know that is the doctrine of bigots and ascetics. I don’t believe in asceticism.’

‘After all,’ said Julian, seating himself, ‘the value of every-

thing is relative. To you and men of your sort, for instance, the value of wine, of diamonds, of riches, is nothing in itself, but only because by them you are enabled to outshine your friends. Now the value of everything material is *nil* to me. I want fame because it is the best thing I know of. I don't care if I am appreciated or valued now, because I know my work is good, and right, and necessary, and will live.'

'Your reward is in the future. Well, I don't want any reward ; I don't wish to look forward, and I don't care to look back, but I should like to enjoy the present, and enjoy my life as I understand it. Where is the harm of that ?'

'No abstract harm, perhaps, but the thing is impossible. To return to this letter, if you do not answer it you will make a fond, honest, true heart unhappy.'

'Why does she care for me ? I am wretched enough in all conscience—what does she want of me ?'

'Dick, where is your chivalry ?'

'Chivalry ! We have outlived those times. It is every man for himself now. A woman's reputation is fair game for any rascal who chooses to tear it in pieces. No ; you must appeal to something else, Julian, if you wish to make an impression.'

'Do you mean you could deceive the woman who trusted you ?'

'I mean nothing ; Luce might have saved me had circumstances been different. The best thing she can do now is to forget my existence.'

'Shall I write to her to this effect ?' said Julian in a cold and serious voice.

'Julian, bear with me a little ; I am not accustomed yet to feeling that everyone despises me.'

'Why need you care what the world thinks ?—only God and your own conscience signify.'

'I am not like you. I *do* care what the world thinks.'

'You can't even act up to the philosophy which tells you to live your life without caring for anyone else. O Dick, you disappoint me.'

'Why do you expect anything ?'

'You are right ; it is foolish. However, as I do not intend to leave you to your own devices, I am going to answer this letter. Now get up quickly and help me.'

In addition to the note from Luce, Julian received a letter from Mr. Highview, stating that he should call in the afternoon, and hold a consultation with the two young men. Julian had lately developed a taste for intrigue ; he enjoyed taking the thread of events in his hand, arranging, deciding, pulling his

friend out of the mire. Mr. Highview came at his request. Dick was to be saved, reinstated, helped against his own will.

Dick, physically strong, was morally weak; Julian, nervous and febrile, of delicate frame and appearance, indomitably strong in mind. He wrote to Luce a kind and reassuring letter, and, when after breakfast Dick plunged into the reposeful languor of a cigar, Julian sat down to his work calmly and impassively, as though nothing more than a page of copy required his attention. At three o'clock Mr. Highview arrived. This excellent man, to whom honour was all-important, looked flushed and flurried. He was full of personal sympathy for Dick, and yet shrank, constitutionally, from familiar intercourse with a person of tarnished honour. Lady Eleanor's observations had borne fruit—he felt he could never give his niece to anyone lying under the ban of suspicion. He greeted Bruce cordially; shook hands, a prey to mixed feelings, with Dick, who seemed silent and constrained, and talked volubly and irrelevantly of the weather.

'Such storms!' he said; 'bridge washed away by the rain; had to take a circuitous route to get to the station; trees uprooted in the park; safer in the country though—chimney-pots very dangerous in London.'

'The storm is over, I fancy,' said Bruce, smoothing out his papers mechanically; 'but with regard to——'

'Lady Eleanor begged to be remembered to you,' hastily put in Mr. Highview; then as an after-thought, he added, looking towards Dick, pale and silent on the sofa, 'and to you too.'

'Lady Eleanor is always kind, and I am sure would be especially kind about this dreadful event.'

Mr. Highview, remembering Lady Eleanor's wrath, had his doubts, but he prudently kept them to himself, merely murmuring: 'Dreadful event, indeed.'

'It must be averted,' said Bruce firmly. 'You must give your valuable opinion as to the course to be pursued.'

'I scarcely know—it is so mysterious.' Mr. Highview glanced doubtfully in the direction of the sofa.

'I do not see that. A pearl necklace, entrusted to Dick, has been stolen; the stupidity or the malice of somebody suggested Dick as the thief; he was careless, certainly, criminally careless; we cannot acquit him of that; but Mr. Highview, let us be logical, is such a thing likely?'

'Likely, no; but if——'

'The necklace has been stolen or lost; if lost, it will probably be found; if stolen, we must endeavour to secure the thief.'

‘Yes, but——’

‘He will be found, I have not much fear ; meanwhile, the first thing to be done, in my opinion, is for the warrant to be withdrawn, and for Dick to clear himself openly.’

‘I agree with you.’

‘Now, Mr. Highview, lend us the aid of your wisdom and experience. The jeweller took out the warrant, I believe?’

‘He did.’

‘You must have some influence with him ; what are his politics?’

‘The firm have always been Conservative.’

‘They will not care to disoblige you. You have great influence ; your niece is engaged to be married to Mr. Carrol.’

‘Not now, I believe—Lady Eleanor——’

‘Pardon me, we will return to that later. There is no need to inform the world that you suspect your future nephew-in-law of fraud. You can bring pressure to bear, and suppress the warrant for the present. The great thing is to gain time ; events may shape themselves as we wish. I have your approval?’

‘I shall, of course, do what I can to elucidate the mystery, both for my own sake, because I am a magistrate, and also to clear your character, Dick,’ said Mr. Highview gravely.

Dick thanked him briefly.

Bruce resumed. ‘I think therefore that Dick should return with you to-night, that you should declare him ready to give himself up when called upon ; you, in your own person, appeal to the jewellers to be careful lest they make some terrible mistake ; doubtless they are only actuated by the desire to obtain back their property, not by spite ; they will listen to you, and Dick must not any longer remain in hiding. Do you share my views?’

‘Entirely. You have explained the matter lucidly and carefully. No man of honour could disagree with you.’

‘Dick’s friends must show their entire trust in him on this occasion ; it is the best service we can any of us tender.’

‘Yes ; we are your friends, Dick.’ Mr. Highview’s voice no longer trembled. ‘And, please God, we shall see you righted.’

He had caught the infection of Julian’s calm trust and confidence ; he had forgotten Lady Eleanor’s warnings.

‘You will return to-night?’ questioned Bruce.

‘Yes, to-night. Pack up your portmanteau, Dick.’

A flush of pleasure passed over Dick’s pale cheeks. He was not accustomed to suspicion and contempt ; they hurt him, he had no armour proof against their attacks—even Mr. Highview’s previous coldness had made him wince. Now that he recog-

nised heartiness and friendliness in Mr. Highview's words his serenity and unruffled *amour propre* returned. He rose, and with a firm step moved into the next room to make his preparations. Julian rang for tea. The landlady answered the bell; the trio perplexed and interested her; there was some mystery about them, she felt sure, and she would have given worlds to unravel it. A mystery, young men, and a possible lover in Dick, if he would only condescend to look at her, a conclusion which she still hoped for, were sufficient to pique any woman's curiosity. Mr. Highview's face, too, was familiar to her. She did not know his name, for he had entered unannounced, and she ransacked her memory for a clue to the vague fancies his appearance evoked. As she bustled about with the tea-tray, she listened eagerly in order to pick up some crumbs of the conversation, but in vain; Bruce was on his guard, and carefully kept Mr. Highview to the discussion of the most ordinary topics.

'I have been thinking,' said Mr. Highview on the landlady's departure, 'I don't believe Lady Eleanor would like you to stay at Highview just now, you see, with Luce; it's awkward, you understand; I am not unfriendly, but it's awkward.'

'Couldn't you go to Long Leam?' asked Bruce.

'Impossible! Granny is ill, and under the charge of my aunt and uncle. They are just now my greatest enemies.'

'But then——'

'I have it,' said Mr. Highview. 'You and Bruce must go to the hotel at West Thorpe; you will be on the spot, no one can say you are afraid; I shall be near and can communicate with you whenever I wish to—besides you must attend to your election.'

'My chance is over.'

'I am not so sure of that; the current of public opinion may set in the opposite direction; you will be looked upon as a martyr, pitied, sympathized with, and raised to greater honour.'

'That is not impossible,' said Bruce.

'Lady Eleanor wishes me to stand,' continued Mr. Highview, with a shamefaced air, 'but I don't care about it; the House of Commons is very mixed now, and besides I am not even sure that it is possible so late in the day; but you who have done all the hard work should persevere, reap your reward, go in and win.'

'Certainly! Try to be ambitious, Dick. Besides, you have no right to disappoint your friends,' said Julian encouragingly.

'It seems my friends know better what is good for me than I do myself,' said Dick ruefully.

‘Of course, or we should not be your friends.’

Thus it was settled, and the three men left by the afternoon train for West Thorpe. Late as it was, Mr. Highview sought an interview with the firm of jewellers, and, judging from the composed and pleased expression of his countenance, with a satisfactory result.

CHAPTER XXV

A LOVER'S TRYST.

JULIAN'S letter considerably eased Luce's anxiety, and her uncle's information tended to diminish it still more. Her lover was well. He was at West Thorpe, near her; matters were not so serious as she had supposed, and he knew that she loved him. She could afford now to wait calmly for the time when they would meet again. This time need not be far distant, for Bruce had promised to send Dick to her as soon as she made arrangements to that effect. It must, unfortunately, be a clandestine meeting, for Lady Eleanor threw herself into such paroxysms of anger whenever Luce mentioned Dick's name that the latter abandoned all attempt to obtain her consent to the interview. Luce neither doubted her own constancy nor that of Dick. It never occurred to her to suppose that worldly circumstances made any difference to love, nor that the fact of her intended possessing fewer friends afforded a reasonable pretext for discarding his attentions. Luce considered her word sacred; she had pledged it to Dick, knowing thoroughly what she was about, and she had no intention of withdrawing it; there might be difficulties perhaps, there might be bitter moments to pass, but they could only be moments—and what are moments to love which counts on eternity? Insensibly she built her castles in the air, and wove her happy day-dreams, finding a keen and searching delight in the prospect of the pains she must endure for her lover's sake.

A day or two elapsed. Luce lived as in a trance, only semi-sentient, impervious to the pricks of ordinary things, passive before Maud's hints and sarcasms, patient under Lady Eleanor's fault-finding. There are times when the body relaxes its demands, and subsides into careless indifference; the supremacy of the soul asserts itself, and lives in an intensity of joy, which is essentially spiritual. Such a period had overtaken Luce; material sorrow was powerless to harm her, for she

existed only in the interior life. Voices sounded dim and far away to her ear : she trod lightly as on air, and listened serenely to the whispers of her heart. And now the hour had come. This very afternoon she was to meet Dick, and hear from his lips that he still needed her. Under the large beech-trees near the river, in a secluded part of the park, the meeting was arranged. Luce was the first to arrive ; she judged every instant wasted out of the presence of her lover, but she was neither anxious nor worried because he was not already there ; she liked to think of him, to dream and linger ; it was happiness enough to walk under the vast spreading aisles of the beech-branches, to hear the murmur of the sleepy river, and to rest in the silence, sometimes quaintly broken by the hoarse cawing of the busy rooks. The day was still, and soft, and misty, a day impregnated with a spirit of sadness, yet suited to a mood of tender, trustful love. The water glistened in a broad silvery streak towards the middle of the stream, shading off into the palest grey, and violet at the edges ; the delicate blue sky was sprinkled with layers of soft grey clouds, of a uniform and harmonious tint. Against the horizon masses of dark foliage stood, shrouded in a mantle of transparent mist ; all nature quivered and shimmered in soft and gentle undertones—sentiment rather than passion seemed the key-note of the situation. Luce walked up and down slowly, drinking in the quiet beauty of the scene. Presently a crackling of the dead leaves, daintily sparkling with moisture, made her turn quickly. In another instant she was clasped in Dick's arms.

‘Luce, how good you are to give me this opportunity.’

‘Good ? What do you mean—are we not engaged ?’

‘Yes, but still——’

Julian had warned him, as he valued his own happiness, not to forsake this true woman.

‘I did not think—how could I tell ? You know what a poor wretch I am.’

‘I know that you are in trouble, and that I love you,’ she said, clinging to him trustfully.

Luce's eyes were so pathetically expressive when she spoke thus from her heart that it was impossible for the most fastidious to deem her plain.

‘How can I accept such a sacrifice ? I am not an utter brute, Luce.’

‘Dear, how pale you look,’ she said, unheeding his question ; ‘you have suffered a great deal ; why was I not by your side from the very first to comfort you ? You know I wanted to comfort you.’

'Yes, I know,' he said wearily, 'you are too good to me, Luce; I do not deserve it.'

'I did not know that love counted the cost and valued itself; have I not told you I love you? Don't you believe me, Dick?'

'I do believe you—yet I scarcely dare to believe you.'

'I, too, have been very unhappy,' confessed Luce; 'let us sit down a little here on the trunk of this tree, it is quite dry and comfortable. We can talk better so.'

They seated themselves on the fallen stem, the venerable bark of which was here and there smooth and slippery, elsewhere rough and grey with clustering moss and lichen.

'Unhappy—you?'

'Yes, to think of what you were enduring. Ah, Dick, there are only two sorts of women—those who love and those who do not—and I——'

'You are the fondest and truest little heart in the world. I appreciate you, Luce,' he said, putting his arm round her.

'Do you?' Her brilliant eyes sought his with looks of love. 'Then I must read you a little sermon. Why do you say I am too good, and praise me and pay me compliments? It pains me, Dick. Do you think I need that? I have my reward when I feel that I can be something to you. As I said before, there are but two sorts of women. If I did not love you no persuasion of yours could induce me to do the least little thing for your sake; but as I love you, such words as sacrifice, goodness, unselfishness, simply don't exist. I am yours. You do not stand still or pause to pay yourself a compliment. Look upon me as yourself——'

'But, Luce,' he said very tenderly. Her words touched him strangely.

'Let me finish. I am *yourself*. I am pleased with every joy, suffer with every pang, in fact my existence is yours. I can have only one real sorrow, and that is to be parted from you.'

She stopped, and, as though overwhelmed by the importance of her self-revelation, bent her head timidly.

'Luce, I accept your sacrifice. As you wish it, nothing shall part us; but, my dear little girl, I fear you are laying up for yourself a great deal of trouble——'

'No, no. Now tell me all.'

She settled herself quietly, her big eyes dilated, while she hung passionately on his lips as he told her of the difficulties with which he had to contend. Though the warrant was not served, and a lull seemed to have fallen upon the proceedings, yet every day brought defections from his side: friends cold

and estranged, side-glances, actual avoidance. Then Luce, nestling closer to his side, recounted her visit to Granny, dwelt upon the old lady's trust and confidence in her grandson, warmed with indignation as she spoke of Aunt Vincent's heartless behaviour, and commented on the changes at Long Leam; the parsimony and the grasping meanness of the woman who had usurped the place of his grandmother.

Dick listened, and his face grew stern and grave. He withdrew the arm that was round Luce. 'They will make her change her will, I am sure,' he said gloomily, 'and then I am done for. I have only a couple of hundred a year of my own. In that case, Luce, we cannot marry, for I shall not accept a fortune from my wife; no, I have not sunk quite so low as that yet.'

Luce's lip trembled. 'I have no fortune,' she said, 'none whatever. Did you think I had?'

'I did not know,' he answered lightly; 'I thought it very likely, your uncle being childless——'

'But he has nephews. Tell me'—she hesitated—'that was not the reason you asked me to marry you?'

Luce winced with shame as she asked this question of her lover; she dared not even look at him.

'The reason—no. I really never thought of it.'

Thank God, then, she could look up; thank God she need not feel ashamed. Maud's insinuations were false! 'Oh, I am so glad,' she said, 'so very glad.'

'Glad that we shall be penniless?'

'No, no, of course; but I think now that you must care for me a little; for myself, I mean, as I have no money.'

'I care for you very much.' He kissed her as he said this, but the kiss was formal; there was little warmth in it. Luce could not help thinking that, in his place—here under the beech-trees where the clear light filtered down and touched the herbs and grasses at their feet, alone with the girl who loved him dearly, so close to her that he must almost hear her heart beat, her little hand in his, his lips touching her soft cheek,—she would not have kissed so, and yet in another instant she chid herself for unworthy doubts. He was taking her without a fortune, purely on her own merits. Luce thought there was something very noble in the manner in which he had received the news of her dowerless condition, and in the indifference he had displayed, yet this was the man vulgar people misunderstood, and accused of theft and fraud. They were fools; no one knew his real character like herself. She

again turned upon him the fire of her lustrous eyes, soft with pride and happiness. 'Do not be dejected, dear,' she said, a touch of motherly kindness in her voice; 'these troubles will pass away, and I am going to help you to bear them. You will be glad to have my help, won't you?'—'Yes, indeed.'

'You don't know how strong I am really,' she said, leaning back against her lover's shoulders, a happy smile playing round her lips; 'strong in health, strong in spirit, I feel as if nothing mattered now I have you'—she had been going to say 'your love,' but she checked herself—she had no right to think he loved her yet. 'Together we can brave the world, your aunt and uncle; as your wife, I shall have the right to fight your battles, to put my love like a shield between you and the attacks of wicked people; you will not mind much then, dear?'

The sweetness of her voice, mellowed by the glow of her strong feeling, completely captivated him, it lulled his senses into a delicious languor, her innocent flattery soothed his ruffled pride, her perfect trust restored his confidence; she was a woman in a thousand, eminently fitted for him, he thought. And Luce talked on, a harmonious lilt in her voice, as she painted their future in glowing colours, touching delicately on his present troubles, and dilating on the talents and capacities he was going to unfold. The confidence of a loving woman inspires the very belief she implies. Dick felt himself stronger and better; he ignored the flattery (unconscious, indeed, the mere gilding of love) and acknowledged the truth of her judgment. And yet he was no more in love with her than he had been on the first day; like a king, he permitted himself to be adored; his senses were cold, for they were charged with gratitude rather than affection, but her assurances steeped him in a delicious kind of lazy well-being. The lotus is a pleasant fruit, easy to assimilate; Luce, poor simple soul, mistook his friendliness, his responsive return of sympathy, for the frail commencement of love, and rejoiced.

'Do not give up the election,' she urged, 'do not—let none think you attach much importance to this accusation; you have nothing to reproach yourself with, but go on your way quietly as if nothing had occurred.'

'Just what Bruce says, yet how can I?'

They had risen, and were passing slowly by the riverside, faint wreaths of mist floated around them, some water-fowl called to each other harshly from the sedges; the daylight gradually declined into a duller tone of grey; there would be no sunset to-night. 'You can, dear Dick, you of all men. I

think Lady Eleanor may be brought round to give you her countenance, and if so, if we can be married——’

‘It is no use thinking of that at present ; let me get out of this vile business first,’ he said impatiently. At that instant he would gladly have given up Luce’s love just to be free, happy, and popular again as he had seemed only a few months ago. He was caught in a kind of noose ; if he could but once have extricated himself he should be more wary for the future.

‘And you do not think our marriage would be advisable—would be of advantage?’ said Luce regretfully.

‘No, no, it is quite impossible ; don’t you see—but the election is different, I shall probably go on with that, it must be decided next week.’

‘Oh, if you can only succeed!’ she said, with a gasp of intense longing.—‘You will be pleased?’

‘Of course. And Granny—Dick, think how pleased she will be, poor old dear. I am going to see her to-morrow ; what shall I say to her?’

‘Tell her I’m awfully sorry to give her all this pain—tell her I mean to lead a more useful life, she shall be proud of me some day.’—‘Dear Dick!’

‘Only she must have patience ; just now I feel knocked down.’

‘Oh, she will have patience—she has been patient all her life, she has believed in you and waited so long.’

‘I can’t think why you women have such trust in a fellow.’—‘Can’t you?’

‘No, by Jove, for the life of me I can’t see why you go on caring when one always disappoints you.’

‘Shall I tell you—because we love the fellow!’ Luce gave a bright little laugh that rippled away and was lost in the murmur of the river.

‘It is a good thing women *can* love. I believe you like us to give you trouble.’

‘Well, we must have something to do, you know,’ and she laughed again.

‘When shall I see you?’ She was serious immediately.

‘I don’t know—it is very difficult—to-day Lady Eleanor has gone over to luncheon at the Grimsby’s, and I knew she was safely absent for an hour or two ; but she does not often go away for luncheon, and then I cannot be sure of my movements—but we can write, and even if I may not talk to you, at least I know now that I have seen you that all is well—and I shall trust you——’

'Yes, you can trust me—but it is no credit to me, I haven't even an excuse for forgetting you, Luce, you have been so kind——'

'Hush!' She put her hand over his mouth. 'It is unsatisfactory parting so—but we must not be too exacting, Dick.'

He understood. He took her in his arms again and kissed her. It gave her a sensation of delicious tremour when he took her like that in his arms, she felt afraid and yet almost acutely happy. The warmth of his strong young life seemed to penetrate her veins, to treble her pulsations, to make her brave, and hardy, and unflinching. Her starved heart expanded and filled her bosom almost painfully. In his arms she would have died without a murmur.

'You good dear girl,' he said, taking both hands, 'I cannot thank you, but I will think of you——'

'Yes, think of me,' she said passionately. She stood alone by the riverside for some moments after he left her, she watched his quick manly stride across the heavy grass, she saw him let himself out of the gate into the carriage-drive, she beheld him in imagination passing along by the sturdy spreading rhododendron bushes, away through the lodge gates to the little public-house where he had left his horse. Her thoughts followed him as he reached home (such a home! a hired chamber in a noisy inn), where possibly Bruce already awaited him, their simple meal, the friendly chat and smoke, the business, the correspondence, all the thousand and one items which make up a man's life, and keep him from that deadly dreaming which is the poison of unoccupied women, passed before her mind. After all, he was happier than she; she was alone, helpless, without any definite business, except that weary business of waiting. She smothered a sigh. The afternoon had been too happy; she would not desecrate it by a single murmur. Her imagination had pictured rightly, had seen as in truth, Dick riding home quickly with lightened heart and hopeful anticipations; but what she had not pictured was an empty room, Bruce absent, and a letter lying in all its blank whiteness on the oil-cloth-covered table. Dick's hand trembled as he took it; he recognised the writing, and he rather guessed than read the words it contained:

'Come to me at once without delay. To-morrow, in the fir plantation, at twelve.—EVELYN.'

A rendezvous, and under such circumstances. It could mean only some fearful complication, some tragic ending. Go to Evelyn, meet her while her husband still treated him as a

vulgar thief, and was eager to put in practice the arm of the law to serve his own personal vengeance. Could it be a trap? No! He would not insult her with the thought. But it was dangerous, horribly dangerous, as he was then situated. Yet he never thought of refusing. A woman in distress, a woman he had loved—Heavens! did he love her still? If so, what would become of Luce?

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHAT LADY FENCHURCH SAID.

WE left Lady Fenchurch on the evening of the day she had driven in to West Thorpe, when, returning, she had been forced to endure a scene of violent jealousy and reproaches from her husband. Her pride was up in arms, she felt no inclination to sue for pardon for a fault she had never committed; she braved his anger with defiant flippancy, and talked recklessly to her sister-in-law at dinner. Sir Hilary scarcely spoke, and Miss Fenchurch, who always took the cue from her brother, answered Evelyn's questions and remarks in a state of mortal terror. That Evelyn should be so foolish, so daring, so ungrateful, passed her understanding; a love affair with a young man was bad and wicked enough in all conscience, but when the husband was Sir Hilary, the most perfect and admirable of brothers, it became a heinous crime. Miss Fenchurch, in her shrivelled virginity, deprived of the stimulus of love and passion, comprehended only a cold and temperate friendship; the mere notion of anything warmer set her thinking in frightened curiosity. What then had occurred between Evelyn and Mr. Carrol? Was it possible that she had accorded the young man so much as a thought stolen from her debt to her husband, and, if so, how and why, were questions that sorely puzzled the old maid. After dinner she preserved a profound silence, for her conversation in the dining-room, broken only by deep sighs, had been kept up solely with a view to the edification of the servants. They were, however, already cognizant of everything, the groom having related the meeting with Dick to the footman, who repeated it to the housemaid, who informed the lady's-maid, who capped this intelligence by the news that Lady Fenchurch had cried pocket-handkerchiefs full of tears, and complained of a dreadful headache after lying on her bed, and drinking a cup of tea brought to her by Miss Fenchurch her-

self, a proceeding utterly at variance with the rules of the house, for which reason the lady's-maid concluded that Lady Fenchurch must be in disgrace with her husband with reference to the said young man, Mr. Dick Carrol. The servants being thus duly informed of everything of interest, Miss Fenchurch need not have laboured so diligently to keep up appearances and to give an air of artless freedom to the extremely constrained relations of the trio. But how seldom do we know what is or is not hidden from the servants, and how much better is it for us to be kept in peaceful ignorance of our own sinful transparency ! Silence reigned in the big drawing-room. Sir Hilary read *The Times* as diligently as though he had never seen a newspaper for a month, his spectacles firmly fixed on his nose, the lamp conveniently at his elbow. Opposite, on the other side of the fireplace, Miss Fenchurch knitted indefatigably, and between them, Evelyn, buried in a large armchair, alternately yawned and read a novel. Presently the silence irritated her nerves past endurance—enforced stillness in company usually has that effect. She jumped up and went to the piano. There she began to play everything she could think of in her jarring mood—airs from 'Patience,' the last valse, fashionable dance music, rattling off one thing after another, reckless defiance expressed in her very finger-tips. Half an hour elapsed, when Sir Hilary folded his paper, and somewhat testily cried out :

'For goodness' sake cease that devil's tattoo on the piano !'

'I thought you liked music,' said Evelyn suavely, ceasing to play ; she had worn off some of her vexation, and now felt inclined for amiability.

'So I do, decent sober music—you don't call that music, I suppose ?'

'Certainly ! dance music is most inspiring,' answered Evelyn, rising, however, and approaching the fireplace. 'How cold my hands are ; this room is a perfect ice-house.'—'It is warm enough here.'

'Yes—in the fireplace—but it is hateful sitting stewing over the coals.'

'I am sorry my house does not please you,' said Sir Hilary coldly, resuming his armchair.

'Now, Hilary, don't let us quarrel.' Evelyn smiled sweetly and spoke in the cajoling accents that usually conquered her husband. 'What is it ? Why are you angry ? I told you the truth—there is no more to be said.'

Sir Hilary did not answer ; he glared straight before him into the fire. Miss Fenchurch cleared her throat.

'I really think, Hilary, it was only a mistake—I mean' (Miss Fenchurch felt that it was impossible to accuse her brother of making a mistake) 'Evelyn is very sorry—you are very sorry, aren't you, Evelyn? Tell him so. You *will* forgive her, Hilary?'

'Excuse me, Miss Fenchurch'—Evelyn's voice was clear and icy. 'There is nothing to forgive. Sir Hilary knows it.'

'At least you have been foolish and insincere,' he said at last.

'That was *before* my marriage; since, I have been a good wife.'

'She has been a good wife, Hilary,' echoed his sister, in her tinkling metallic tones.

'Let us be friends, Hilary, do!' Evelyn knelt down beside her husband's chair, and took his limp hand in hers.

'Yes, do, Hilary!' again chimed in Miss Fenchurch.

'These rumours, these revelations in families, are very unpleasant. I wish my wife to be above reproach.'

'Yes, of course, above reproach!' said the old maid, nodding her head.

'And I find you have deceived me—have had a love affair I knew nothing about.'

'It wasn't much of a love affair,' said Evelyn airily; 'besides, he is going to be married now.'

'Well'—the ice was breaking, evidently Sir Hilary meant to relent.—'I will not be too hard on you, as you are young; you must promise to hold no further intercourse with Mr. Carrol—my adversary, politically, remember, therefore additionally to be avoided, and I will perhaps make no more allusion to the extremely unpleasant events of the past.'

'How kind, how forgiving you are!' said Miss Fenchurch adoringly. 'I told you, Evelyn, that my brother was a grand character. Ah! you should not make him angry; it will never occur again, my dear, I hope.'

'Hilary,' said Evelyn, who now stood quietly resting her arm on the mantelshelf, 'you may be quite sure I shall not betray your confidence, but I cannot bear to be treated like a school-girl; you were very unjust and cruel in your suspicions to-day;' a sob choked her utterance; though defiant, she was not hardened, and adversity or disgrace, coupled with absence from her husband's roof, was the very last thing in the world she desired.

'There, dear, there,' said Sir Hilary soothingly, 'we will talk no more of it.'

'But I do not like to be suspected and accused,' Evelyn said between her sobs.

‘My dear, what are you crying for?’ asked Miss Fenchurch. ‘When my brother says he will not mention the matter again, I think you are very fortunate.’

Evelyn began to dry her eyes. The tears she had shed were rather nervous than sorrowful; she hated jarrings and scoldings and things contrary to the amenities of life. In her renunciation of Dick she had been greatly influenced by the desire of a quiet life, and the nervous shrinking from scenes. And now, here, after her show of good principle and wifely conduct, she was enduring the very disagreeable things in anticipation of which she had strangled her love at its birth. Sir Hilary disliked to see women cry. He rose, fidgeted about, wiped his spectacles, took out his pocket-handkerchief and blew his nose; then, as Evelyn grew calmer, he walked up to her and kissed her on her forehead.

‘Come and play a game of dummy whist,’ he said, ‘my dear; you will sleep the better for it afterwards.’

Miss Fenchurch bustled up and got out the cards, and arranged the counters. By tacit consent no more was said on the subject; and when the demure butler brought in the tray of wine and water and the bed-candles, a scene of more unimpeachable domestic propriety could scarcely have met his eyes. Sir Hilary had taken dummy, and, thanks to Miss Fenchurch’s forgetfulness, by which he claimed two revokes, and Evelyn’s preoccupation, the few shillings he had won might be heard to fall with a jingle into his trousers’ pocket, while he chuckled audibly.

‘You must really be more careful, Rachel,’ he said graciously. ‘At your age you ought not to revoke like a raw miss in her teens.’

Allusions to age did not please the old maid, but, thankful that her brother’s equanimity was now happily restored, she forbore to show her vexation in any acrimonious repartee. Evelyn dismissed all further thought of Dick from her mind; the subject now had become really far too unpleasant, and she sincerely hoped the slight conjugal squall had blown over without ill-effects; but it had given her somewhat of a fright, and she determined to act prudently and circumspectly for the future. Friday morning arrived, and the pearl necklace, which Messrs. Cherry and Appleton had promised her faithfully, had not yet reached her. She grew anxious, for she was particularly desirous to please Sir Hilary, and she knew that he liked her to display this, his last new and handsome gift, whenever an opportunity afforded itself. On this occasion they were to dine with Mr. and Mrs. Grimsby, a rich brewer, who, having

partially retired from business, endeavoured to spend some of his large fortune in ostentatious hospitality. Mrs. Grimsby had fine diamonds, with which she took care to cover herself; and it would be doubly disappointing were she totally to eclipse Evelyn. The post had come in, and there was no sign of the pearls. Evelyn debated in her own mind the wisest course to pursue, finally deciding to drive in herself to West Thorpe and fetch the necklace. The jewellers were generally so punctual, so business-like, they had promised so faithfully, that the affair was doubly incomprehensible. As she was starting Sir Hilary came out of his study.

‘Where are you going, Evelyn?’

‘I am going to West Thorpe,’ she said, dropping the words out as she passed, too fidgety to arrest her steps for discussion.

‘What, before luncheon—is not that rather unusual for you?’

‘I had a headache, and I must buy some ribbon to wear in my hair to-night.’

‘You will put on your pearls,’ said Sir Hilary, signing to the servant to bring him his coat.

‘Of course! are you coming, then?’ she added nervously, buttoning her gloves.

‘Yes, I have some business with Dewsnap, and, as you are driving in, I may as well go with you.’

Evelyn dared make no objection, and vaguely hoped she might call for her necklace without attracting any notice, while Sir Hilary paid his visits to the lawyer. She sprang lightly into the pony carriage, and took the reins while Sir Hilary settled himself beside her. His ruddy face bore an unusually happy expression; he took out a cigar and began to smoke in silent beatitude. It pleased him to be driving beside his pretty young wife, so that everyone should see on what excellent terms they both were.

‘You haven’t taken me out in your pony-carriage for a long time,’ he remarked presently; ‘I think it runs very easy, but those ponies are not pulling well together; doesn’t Box bore a good deal?’ Evelyn confessed that he did make her wrist ache, and Sir Hilary, telling her to stop, got out, and himself readjusted the ponies’ bits. He stood for a moment in front of the pole, cigar in mouth, contemplating the elegant equipage, the ponies, and their graceful mistress, and a smile of satisfaction beamed on his countenance.

‘Quite a first-class turn-out,’ he said as he seated himself again beside her; ‘they don’t pull now, do they?’ he asked; ‘they ought to have mouths like satin.’

'It is quite right since you altered the bits,' said Evelyn.

'Very well, then.' He turned to the spruce little groom. 'Now, Tom, do you hear, always bit her ladyship's ponies like that ; never let me see them again as they were just now, yawning about like brutes in a van.'

Sir Hilary was too well satisfied with himself and his belongings to notice his wife's constrained silence, which she spasmodically broke by interjectional phrases of the smallest import, nor did he remark that her pallor increased as they neared the town.

'Where shall I drive you?' inquired Evelyn, when the first straggling houses became visible.

'You can set me down anywhere,' he said : ' what have you got to do ?'

'I shall take you at once to Dewsnap's, then,' she said, ignoring his question, but Sir Hilary insisted on a *détour* by the linendraper's, whither Evelyn had unwittingly declared she was going. The shop was in the market-place, and this gave an opportunity to the vain old man of being seen driving through the busiest streets with his beautiful wife. The ambition was innocent enough, but Evelyn's guilty conscience pricked her with weary wonderings as to the meaning of this wish. At last when she had passed the jewellers', where she dared not stop, and had deposited her husband at Mr. Dewsnap's, and watched him safely inside the door, she took courage and drove back rapidly to the jewellers' shop ; the little groom ran in at her request and summoned one of the partners, who came out looking fatter and more oily than ever, not forgetting to wash his hands with imaginary soap as he stood bowing and smiling by the side of the carriage.

'My necklace, Mr. Cherry,' said Evelyn, bending towards him, and speaking in a low voice. 'I have called for my necklace ; why didn't you send it as you promised ?'

'But we did send it, my lady, yesterday, by the young gentleman himself.'

'The young gentleman ! what young man ?' questioned Evelyn feverishly, scarcely daring to believe the possibility that flashed upon her mind.

'The young man—I fancy he was instructed to call for it.'

'I never instructed any one ; what do you mean ? Are you mad ?'

'Excuse me, my lady, we thought it was to save time, and we were glad to give the necklace to your messenger.'

'It is stolen ! I tell you it is stolen ! What gross careless-

ness on your part ! What am I to say to Sir Hilary ? Don't stand staring there as if you were an idiot !' she added sharply.

'My lady, it is the very first time such a thing has occurred, and I will at once inquire into the matter.'

'Can you restore me the necklace ? Where is it ? Do you trust valuable jewellery to the first beggar in the street ?'

'He was not a beggar, my lady, he was a real gentleman, a friend of yours, I believe—Mr. Dick Carrol. If your ladyship will wait, I will ask my foreman for further particulars as to what he said.'

'I don't want particulars—I want my necklace.'

'I will do all that is in my power, my lady ; we will send at once to Mr. Carrol's, and we will communicate with the police, and I have little doubt the thief will be traced.'

'I cannot stay now,' said Evelyn feverishly, 'Sir Hilary is waiting ; you must write and apologize to him yourself for your rashness ; he will be very angry, and he is certain never to employ you again.'

Evelyn drove off, her brow compressed in anger, her face deadly white, and left the poor old gentleman standing there half-scared, still bowing respectfully on the curbstone. The ponies dashed down the narrow street ; Evelyn, driving recklessly, nearly upsetting a tinker's cart drawn by a poor little donkey ; the ponies snorted (the patient ass is ever an object of aversion to the highly bred and prosperous steed), shied, and nearly bolted against a dead wall. Evelyn, recalled to a sense of her position, grasped the reins more firmly and reduced the ponies to a sober trot. But her thoughts were dancing wildly ; what should she say—Dick Carrol, Dick a thief, what did it mean ?—how avert her husband's displeasure, how account for the mystery she had preserved about the necklace ? He would be very angry, perhaps think she was in league with Dick ; and he would believe the old story which she had already found such difficulty in disposing of. Anxious and miserable she awaited her husband. Sir Hilary emerged presently from the lawyer's house looking extremely cheerful ; he had drunk a glass of famous old sherry, and received good news of the election prospects. Mr. Dewsnap came out with him, and the two men, talking, walked slowly down the narrow-paved approach to the gate.

'Here, Dewsnap, are not her ladyship's ponies looking well ? I know you are a judge of horses.'

'So, so,' said the lawyer, flattered in his only weakness—even lawyers are human, 'but I can very well see that these are a beautiful pair.'

‘Beautiful, yes ; and I can tell you my lady knows how to drive them,’ said Sir Hilary, swinging himself up beside her.

‘Your ladyship is quite well?’ said Mr. Dewsnap urbanely, struck by her strange pallor.—‘Quite well, thank you.’

Evelyn immediately flushed a brilliant pink, which confirmed the wary old lawyer in the idea that there was something amiss.

‘Well, good-bye, Dewsnap,’ shouted Sir Hilary, as they drove off ; ‘come and dine soon, I’ve a new bin of claret I want you to taste.’

CHAPTER XXVII.

A COUNTRY DINNER-PARTY.

ON the drive home they talked of indifferent subjects. Evelyn determined to leave everything to chance ; the necklace might be found, or at any rate the jewellers must bear the blame of their carelessness. Having decided this, she bent all her energies to be as charming as possible to her husband, who returned home in a most agreeable humour. Evelyn took care to delay her dressing so that the carriage was at the door before she was ready to start, and she had but time to clasp round her neck a small diamond *rivière*, and wrapped in her cloak to hurry downstairs. Sir Hilary therefore had no opportunity of seeing what had occurred until she threw off her cloak in Mrs. Grimsby’s front hall, when he merely exclaimed, ‘Why, you have not got on your pearls after all!’

‘I was in such a hurry,’ she replied, following the stately footman into the drawing-room.

During dinner Evelyn, the lady of highest rank, and consequently placed next her host, felt her husband’s eyes fixed doubtfully upon her ; but the laws of fashionable society have this advantage, that they separate husband and wife, and effectually preclude all opportunity of conjugal jars and cross-questionings. On the other side of her was seated a rich young stockbroker, who, his time having hitherto been occupied in money-making, remained a novice in the society of pretty women. He thought Evelyn quite the most beautiful creature he had ever beheld, and allowed his eyes to roam gleefully from the top of her well-bred head with its coils of raven-black hair to the little pink ear, the pillared throat, and the full, graceful figure, until it reached the white and jewelled hands, and was lost in the mazes of her intricate yellow drapery. He envied

the possessor of so much beauty, and thought that when he chose a wife he should treat himself to just such an one, a fine animal, well-bred, well-mannered, and worth the money. He was rich enough in all conscience, and he had no idea of putting up with an inferior article. Evelyn, unconscious of the mental appraisement she was undergoing, and pleased to distract her mind at any cost, laughed heartily at his puerile and somewhat vulgar jokes, and playfully answered his attempts at gallantry.

'Fine house, this, isn't it?' he said, 'my friend Grimsby's; I've known him a long time, you know—all the best houses in the City are acquainted—doesn't do things by halves—first-rate wine—a French *chef*—and, by Jingo, such pictures—you see there's a Millais, and a Turner, and a what's the fellow's name?

'Sir Joshua Reynolds,' suggested Evelyn.

'Yes, yes; he don't go in for those washed-out dug-up dead people—the ascetic school, you know; likes flesh and blood; quite my opinion—I like flesh and blood; fond of pictures, Lady Fenchurch?'

'Yes, very fond,' said Evelyn.

'Paint a little, perhaps? Most young ladies paint—their faces, too, I mean—ha, ha!' Evelyn looked grave.

'In your case that don't apply; couldn't paint the rose or the lily, eh? Ever had your portrait taken, by some big chap I mean?'—'Never,' answered Evelyn.

'Dear me! Well, now, I should have thought—what is your husband's name? He is that red-faced, white-whiskered man, isn't he?'

'Sir Hilary,' said Evelyn, smothering her laughter.

'Sir Hilary—yes; what a queer name! Reminds one of an old rhyme, "Dickery, dickery dock, the mouse ran up the clock." Well, Sir Hilary ought to have you painted by Leighton, now, or Watts. Tell him so from me, will you?'

'I'll tell him, certainly; but you know those great painters ask enormous prices.'

'And quite right, too; always ask the price your goods can command. What is the use of being rich if you don't get the best of everything—first-class prices and a first-rate article—it's cheap in the long run.'

'Yes,' vaguely assented Evelyn; she did not quite know what to say. The mercantile view of life had not yet occurred to her. There was a good deal in its favour certainly, and, now she thought of it, had she not been actuated by its influence in the transaction of her own marriage? Her reflections were interrupted by Mr. Grimsby's jolly voice.

‘I’m going to work like a nigger for your husband,’ he said, ‘on polling-day ; I’ve no idea of these confounded Radicals getting into Parliament, and turning everything upside down. What do they mean by unearned increment and all that jargon ? When a man has got money, never mind whether he has earned it or not, naturally he wishes to stick to it. Besides, it’s all such stuff, that talk about land ; land is taxed heavily enough as it is, and if you meddle with land, what is to prevent you meddling with capital ? and in that case England may whistle for her prosperity ; capital will make wings for itself.—Try this Pomeray ; it’s superb.’

‘Do you think Sir Hilary will get in for the county ?’ asked Evelyn, who scarcely felt herself equal to a political argument.

‘Can’t say, I’m sure. You never can tell what makes people vote ; but I should think so ; he is very popular, and rides to hounds—the farmers like him.’—‘I think they do.’

‘Then that other young fellow, his adversary, has no stake in the county, has not been here much. What has he ever done ? He isn’t a landlord ; he’s mixed up with a lot of racing fellows, the scum of the earth.’

‘Do you mean Mr. Carrol ?’

‘Yes, of course, Dick Carrol ; he is just Lady Eleanor’s nominee. She is an infernally proud woman—only comes to see my wife under protest. I’m sure my wife is handsome enough for anything.’ He looked towards Mrs. Grimsby at the bottom of the table, who, stately and resplendent in red satin glittered with diamonds like a Roman Catholic image.

‘Mrs. Grimsby is very handsome.’

‘Handsome—I should think so. Why, when I married her she was so beautiful I did not dare let her walk out alone ; they mobbed her—I assure you people positively mobbed her. She is worthy of diamonds, she is now ; shows them off to perfection.’

At that instant the signal was given for the ladies to rise, and Evelyn marched out of the room obedient to her hostess’s wave of the hand. In the drawing-room, which was crammed with beautiful things, arranged with the want of art and comfort that so plainly demonstrates the absence of real refinement, Mrs. Grimsby made a great fuss over Evelyn. She was the latest bride, a My-Lady, and the wife of the future member. Mrs. Grimsby felt herself justified in showing her preference. The other ladies, in very high gowns and skimpy draperies, timid country girls, or common-place wives of business men, whom they had taken from humble families in days when

a large fortune was an impossible prospect, and who seemed to serve the purpose of the guests on the stage, flocked together helplessly, and looked over photographs, books, or in undertones conversed about their respective household affairs. Mrs. Grimsby signed to Evelyn to take a seat on the large crimson satin sofa, of which her own gown seemed the gigantic remnant. 'You were not cold at dinner? I hope Mr. Grimsby took care of you; you are looking a little pale, dear Lady Fenchurch.'

'Thank you, I am quite well.'

'Of course, one must make allowances—*young* married women, you know. You don't hunt now, I suppose.'

'Indeed, I do; I'm extremely fond of it.'

'Well, now, you are just like me. I used to be quite mad about it. I had an elegant figure, you know, and very fine horses to ride; but Mr. Grimsby got frightened, and persuaded me to give it up.'

Evelyn looked at Mrs. Grimsby's ample proportions, and thought that, if she had hunted lately, Mr. Grimsby was right in his consideration for the welfare of the horses.

'It does not do for ladies to get falls, you know; it jars one, and then so much out-door exercise spoils the complexion.'

'Oh, if one thinks of one's complexion——'

'Lor, my dear, when you are a little older you will find it necessary. Mr. Grimsby never forgets to bring me the cold cream regularly before he gets into bed.'—'Indeed!'

'I suppose you are quite in a tremor about this election. I wish Mr. Grimsby would have stood. I think M.P. to your name looks elegant, though of course it does not affect a lady. But he won't; he says it is throwing away good money for a bad cause. I don't understand politics. Do you?'

'Not very well.'

'Well, there is no need—let the men manage that for us; it is their business; only, of course, one must be a little *au fait* of things.'

Mrs. Grimsby was very proud of her French, of which she had acquired a tolerable smattering at a French boarding-school. She pronounced it with a true cockney accent, but then, as she said, it gave you so much *éclat* to know French.

'Do you love orchids? I do. Here, I will show you a present Mr. Grimsby made me on my birthday—it cost £100. Isn't it a dear, ugly darling? I like 'em because they are so quaint.' The two ladies rose to examine a peculiarly ugly brown and yellow flower, placed in a china pot near; the flower looked

as though it had tried to be a butterfly of some kind and had failed egregiously. 'It is very rare,' said Mrs. Grimsby.

'Very rare indeed, I should think,' said Evelyn. Then they returned to the red satin sofa, and Mrs. Grimsby dilated on her establishment.

'Now, tell me, Lady Fenchurch, do you prefer powder or not? I say powder; it shows off plush breeches and silk stockings so much better. I may say I think I am fortunate in my footman; one came from the Marquis of Thistledown, and the other from the Duke of Silkstone. You know, the Duke has such gardens, and sells all his fruit, they say—rather mean, I think—but they are fine fellows, aren't they?'

'Very fine,' assented Evelyn, as soon as the footman in question, accompanied by the groom of the chamber, had departed with the coffee-tray.

'But they are a lazy lot—you wouldn't believe how lazy. I found out the other day that whenever I go to town for a night, the footman lies in bed and has his breakfast brought up to him by the scullery-maid; but what can one do? One must have fine fellows. I understand the Earl of Courtly always takes his footmen without a character, provided they are good-looking and stand six feet one in their stockings.'

Further disclosures were rendered impossible by the entrance of the gentlemen. Mrs. Grimsby removed herself to the other side of the red satin sofa, and the young stockbroker immediately made his way to the vacant place beside Evelyn.

'Have we been a long time?' he said tenderly. 'I am afraid we have; men always smoke now after dinner, and that keeps them as long as drinking wine used to in the old days. It is a shame, I think, to stay away from the ladies when it isn't necessary.'

'Oh, we don't mind, I assure you,' said Evelyn.

'Well, I don't call that civil, Lady Fenchurch—you are not like some of the girls I know, I hope, who pretend they do not care a bit about gentlemen's society? It is such a nonsensical fad, and can't be true.'

'I like men's society very well.'

'Of course you do. You are a woman of taste, I am sure.'

At that instant Lady Fenchurch noticed a cold glitter in Sir Hilary's blue eye (no eye can express such steely impenetrability as an orb of that colour); he stood a little way off, playing with his watch-chain and talking to Mrs. Grimsby. They seemed to be speaking of her, but probably that was only her own fancy. She scarcely heard the pretty speeches the stock-

broker poured into her ear ; it was as much as she could do to sit still. She was heartily glad when the evening drew to an end, and she once more started to drive home. She leant back in the carriage, pretending to sleep. Sir Hilary was not asleep ; she could see through a slit in her half-open eyes that he was looking out at the moonlight, with his head bent forward. He helped her carefully to alight when they stopped, as was his custom, and followed her to her bedroom. She heard his slow footsteps behind her, and an unreasoning dread of his quiet manner, his mysterious dogged silence, oppressed her. When they reached her room he shut the door carefully ; then, standing in front of the chair into which she had sunk, he said gently :

‘And now, Evelyn, where is your pearl necklace?’

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHAT LADY FENCHURCH DID.

‘I—LEFT it at Cherry and Appleton’s.’

‘So I understand ; but how comes it that the police have already been informed it is missing, that Mr. Buck, the sanitary engineer, whom we met at dinner to-night, says it is the talk of West Thorpe, and that up to this moment I have not been told of your loss? You must have reasons for this extraordinary behaviour—what are they?’

Sir Hilary’s calm tone reassured his wife. She forgot that he had a magistrate’s training, and was aware from long experience of the disadvantage of flurrying a witness.

‘I had better tell you the truth,’ she said.

‘Certainly, that is the wisest course—if you can.’

‘I broke the string of my necklace some days ago ; it was careless of me, for I knew how particular you were about it, so I stupidly did not tell you, and took the pearls into Cherry and Appleton’s to be mended.’

‘Which day was that?’

‘You know, Tuesday last, when you were cross with me.’

‘Ah—the day you met Dick Carrol.’—‘Yes.’

‘Did you tell him about the necklace?’

‘Yes—I think I did—he asked me where I had been.’

‘Exactly, and then——’

‘Then I called for it to-day, and the jeweller said it had been already taken away by a young man.’

‘Mr. Dick Carrol?’

‘Yes, that was what he said—how do you know?’

‘Everyone knows it now. Buck told me.’

‘I was very angry, I knew you would reproach me for carelessness. I said that I believed you would never employ Messrs. Cherry and Appleton again——’

‘Why did you not tell me this?’

‘Because you were so displeased on Tuesday, I did not want to annoy you again, and I thought the necklace would be found.’

‘Lady Fenchurch, that was not your reason. You were afraid to tell me because you knew who had it——’

‘I—who—what do you mean?’

‘Is it necessary to explain?—your lover had lost money and you gave him the pearls to pay his racing debts; the devotion of women is indeed marvellous—I should never have thought it of you—you look so quiet—and you are so impulsive.’

‘Hilary—no—you cannot——’ Evelyn jumped up, and as she did so her cloak slipped down and exposed her dazzling white shoulders and the glittering string of diamonds round her neck. ‘I swear to you this is not true. I have never told you an untruth yet; indeed, indeed, this is not so.’

‘But you have deceived me already,’ he said, growing grim in spite of his ruddiness, ‘and you will deceive me again.’ Then he sat down, while she looked at him helplessly, wondering what would happen next. She seemed to be assisting at the agony of some other person; now the first moment of tremor had passed by, she was perfectly calm, and simply waited. Sir Hilary got up again, his face was purple, he seemed wrestling with impotent passion. ‘That young ass! to think you should befool me so—my God!—what are women made of?’

‘Hilary, calm yourself,’ said Evelyn, and her voice was like the voice of a ghost, it sounded so dim and far away.

‘You, whom I was so proud of——’ He had not loved her particularly, but he had been proud of her—he had cherished his possession. He grew silent again, and the silence between those two was most oppressive. The bed-candle flickered in lonely twinkling on the large dressing-table, decked out in maize ribbons and white lace; Evelyn in her agitation had omitted to light the stately wax tapers in their silver candlesticks; the room, fitfully illuminated by the fire-rays, was spectral with mysterious darkness and black hidden corners, and from the shadow Sir Hilary’s face, purple and distorted, glared back at her like that of some evil fiend. Evelyn grew frightened, ‘Oh, Hilary—speak to me, you frighten me.’

‘To be a laughing-stock—a thing to point at—to be dis-

graced—what have you done, Evelyn, what have you done?' He sobbed; a man's sobs are terrible to listen to.

'Oh, Hilary!' she took him by the arm and tried to soothe him like a child, 'believe me, there is no harm done——'

He started from her side. 'At least he shall suffer—the brute you prefer to me shall suffer. I will pursue him, hunt him down; he shall stand in a felon's dock, and I will be there to gloat over his ruin. He is a gentleman, and disgrace will touch him keenly——'—'Hilary!'

'Yes, madam, I am not good enough, apparently, to command your truth, but I am good enough to be tricked—for you to take jewels and presents from me—you can accept my name, my position, my affection, but you can't pay me decent respect. Well, we shall see—it is war to the knife between us now.'

Before she could answer he had left her, and slammed the door of his dressing-room, where he locked himself in.

Evelyn sat on stonily for a few seconds after his departure—she felt stunned by his violence and incapable of thought. Presently, however, the force of conventional habit returned, she remembered her maid who was sitting up for her, summoned her, and began to undress. The maid noticed nothing, for Lady Fenchurch was silent, but as kind as usual, dismissing her as soon as she put on her pink dressing-gown. When she was alone, Lady Fenchurch looked around nervously and gave a little moan. The moan increased to a smothered sob, and presently tears began slowly to run down her cheeks. How rough and hard Sir Hilary had been, all the greater contrast to his usual polished manner; how he had spoken to her—to her whom men usually bowed down to, deferentially and respectfully adored. Even the vulgar stockbroker had been studiously polite, and showed his admiration for her in frank and clumsy fashion. Poor Dick, too, whom she had been so fond of once (the once a very long time off), it was hard he should be punished when he was innocent. Poor Dick! Why it was his persistence, his want of tact, his folly, that had brought all the misery upon her. She must not pity him, she must think of herself. She saw her life before her, stretched out endlessly, saddened by a great shadow of revenge and jealousy and disorder, especially hard to one who loved beauty and pleasantness so much that she was willing to sacrifice anything for them.

She saw the choleric old man, cruel and consistent in his purpose, standing like a jailor over her. She had wanted so little; she had been satisfied with her pearls and her pony-carriage and her pleasant boudoir, and now the spirit of dis-

cord had scattered all these little happinesses to the wind, and left her shivering and lonely. She remembered to have seen women who had led unhappy domestic lives, one in particular, who had been handsome once, she was assured, who was now a tall, lean, sallow woman with the air of a century of grief upon her pallid cheeks, and unutterable misery in her dead eyes. All the sparkle, the vitality, had gone out of them; she looked exactly what she was reduced to—a crushed being. And Evelyn then had said to herself that she would never succumb so, that she would always keep her youth, her spirits, her vigour; now suddenly, for the first time, she conceived a possibility of growing like that wretched woman, of leading a crushed existence. Love to her meant nothing so much as gratification of vanity; she was too cold for the whirlwind of passion, too shallow for the excitement of danger. She no longer cared for Dick, and yet by some strange grip of Fate he was destined to dog and embitter her days. She sat thus thinking, with a child's wild foolish longing to escape, to fly from the ills and troubles of her lot. She sat thus wide-eyed, a beautiful statue in her straight falling draperies, her delicate nostrils quivering, her hands clasping and unclasping nervously. If she were to lose everything, to lose Dick's love, and her husband's trust, and his presents, and his pride in her beauty and her dresses, what would become of her? She dreaded disgrace as much as he did, but for another reason—because of its discomforts. She never desired a battle-at-arms with the world; she preferred the cordial hand stretched out to bid her welcome, and smooth the crumpled rose-leaves in her path. Just then the stable-clock rang out the hour, two chimes in its full low voice sounded forth upon the still night air. Two o'clock! She must not sit there any longer, or she would look pale and ill to-morrow. Her beauty was her greatest weapon now. She extinguished the candles with a kind of shivering dread; it seemed to her as though a spirit-presence filled the chamber; not a sound reached her from her husband's room; but the old oak panelling cracked and groaned in unearthly fashion; the hangings seemed, to her high-strung nerves, to wave and rustle strangely. She flung herself quickly into bed, and tried to remember scraps of the hymns of her youth. When she awoke, Sir Hilary had already gone out riding, and the maid asked her if she would like breakfast in her own room. He had left word she was not to be disturbed. With a sybarite desire to defer the disagreeable as long as possible, she accepted the offer, dawdled over her chocolate, and glanced at the *Morning*

Post, trying to imagine that there was nothing changed in her life. About twelve o'clock she sauntered into the library, where Miss Fenchurch was usually to be found knitting at the interminable piece of work, which grew and grew, and yet never seemed to turn into anything. She was absent; even her knitting had been carefully folded up and put away.

'Is everyone dead in this house?' said Evelyn to herself, smothering a yawn; she had rested badly, and felt cross and tired, but the dread and silly fancies of the night had evaporated. She returned idly to her own boudoir, where the fire burnt brightly, and amused herself by warming her tiny slippers and playing with the pug. When at last the luncheon-bell sounded—hungry, notwithstanding her anxiety, and hoping to obtain some information from her sister-in-law—Evelyn hurried into the dining-room. Only one place was laid, only one chair was drawn up to the table. Then Evelyn, smothering the pride which had hitherto kept her silent (for there is a courage in pride which sometimes shames the finest principle), asked for Miss Fenchurch. The butler looked surprised, and respectfully answered that she had gone out for a drive into West Thorpe, he believed, and left word that no one was to wait luncheon. Evelyn swallowed the meal in solemn silence under the glassy gaze of the irreproachable servants, but she never knew what she ate, for her appetite had completely deserted her.

'Will your ladyship drive this afternoon?' inquired the obsequious servant, polite and well drilled, and ready to anticipate her smallest want.

'No, no,' she said impatiently. 'I require nothing; I shall walk.'

As she paced the shrubberies among the dank humid beeches and the brown shoots of the mahonia, a wintry desolation overspread her soul. The soft damped gravel yielded beneath her light tread, and the wet grass edges moistened her skirts. It was dreary—dreary. To gay young hearts, heavy grey skies and perpetual half-tints seem but as the neutral background for their happiness; to sad, sick souls the gloom intensifies the pain and increases the depression. Evelyn just now was sadder than she had ever felt in her life. Only one grief had befallen her before, the death of her father, and then she was too young to pine long. Miss Fenchurch's kind words and sugar-plums, Sir Hilary's promise of a pony, had sufficed to calm her. And the pony and the sugar-plums still served as the symbols of her desires. Luxury, freedom, and approbation were their names now. In the evening Miss Fenchurch returned. To all

inquiries she only answered that she had been to call on an old friend, the wife of the vicar of West Thorpe, and that not having seen her for some time she had thought it necessary to prolong the visit beyond the limits of a morning call. Miss Fenchurch looked as usual, prim, starched, and matter-of-fact. If she knew anything abnormal that occurred, she was discreet enough to avoid unpleasant allusions. She brought a message from Sir Hilary to the effect that he was detained by business, and should not return until the morrow. Evelyn was forced to be content with scant information ; she chafed at being left like a naughty child out in the cold, but consoled herself by reflecting that probably Sir Hilary was already ashamed of his stormy ebullition of temper, and that when she next beheld him he would be in an angelic and repentant frame of mind. The evening passed sociably enough. Miss Fenchurch knitted, and Evelyn played the piano. There was nothing to denote the smallest ruffling of the conjugal surface, and when Lady Fenchurch went to bed it was with the fullest intention of making up for the previous night's want of sleep.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SIR HILARY'S REVENGE.

BUT when next Evelyn saw her husband she noticed a great and inexplicable change in him. His cheeks were still ruddy, but the red was fixed in dull patches over the cheek-bone, while the remainder of the complexion showed a yellowey white ; the mouth was set and hard, the eyes as cold as stones ; the merry twinkle that had rendered them, spite of their small size, agreeable and expressive, now disappeared, leaving a filmy impenetrability. Subjected to the strictest scrutiny the eyes gave no clue to the internal emotion. Yet Sir Hilary was perfectly courteous and kind to his wife ; all trace of passion had vanished ; he addressed her in an ordinary tone, but he avoided all occasions of being alone with her. He confessed to being very busy, and seemed absorbed in papers. To Evelyn, when she first greeted him with a somewhat anxious smile, he said casually that she need not distress herself about the necklace, for that it would probably soon be restored to its owner, and the tone of his voice as he said this was unpleasantly satirical, but Evelyn only remarked that she was glad, and he made no further observation. His glance fell upon her for a moment curiously, as if to

see whether any hidden meaning lay under her equanimity, but apparently unable to detect anything suspicious in her manner he presently removed his eyes from her face. Yet all the time, though nothing was said, though the machinery of routine appeared admirably well oiled, Evelyn felt as though she were walking over a volcano, felt as the traveller in an Alpine pass who sees the bridge fall away behind him into the bottomless ravine, or as the dwellers under the shadow of a lava mountain, who, awe-struck, listen to the almost inaudible mutterings of the terrific forces of nature, which at any unexpected moment may burst forth and overwhelm their humble homestead. The sense of the inscrutable, the sense of suspense, the sense of insecurity, adds to the horror of death, and the inevitable can be even more serenely faced than the possible or improbable. Her misgivings were not entirely unfounded, for on Monday Sir Hilary announced that there was a warrant out against Dick Carrol, and that he hoped soon to see him safely lodged in jail.

‘You have done this, Hilary?’ cried Evelyn, the peculiar rich creaminess of her complexion turning to a sickly yellow as she gazed at her husband with large horror-struck eyes. ‘Why, he is an innocent man!’

‘So you say; well, if he is innocent he can easily prove it, but the facts are damnably against him.’ Sir Hilary recapitulated what we know already. That Dick’s losses on Fairy Queen had been heavy, that he had paid up everything rigidly, that on the day after Evelyn’s first visit to the jeweller, when, as she herself confessed, she told Mr. Carrol of the broken necklace, a young man, distinctly identified as Dick by the foreman of the shop and a boy who happened to be present, called and took away the pearls. ‘Now let him clear himself if he can,’ said Sir Hilary, rubbing his hands.

‘You have done an infamous thing,’ said Evelyn, forgetting her terror in the anger her husband’s conduct evolved; ‘you did this out of spite, though I told you as solemnly as I could that both he and I were innocent.’

‘You told me so, certainly. But once before you did not speak the truth, and I never, a second time, trust a person who has already deceived me.’

‘But this is horrible.’

‘Well, you see, if you and I quarrelled there would be a scandal; I don’t like scandals in families; this is a pleasant and easy way of punishing you both, for you must stand by me under pain of being considered a wicked wife. Besides which, Carrol will think that I do all this under your influence and put

it down to your displeasure at his marriage. I have thought it all out well. I don't wish my little plot to fail—I have taken every precaution.'

Evelyn buried her face in her hands. Sir Hilary seemed at that instant to reveal the nature of a fiend incarnate. It was difficult to believe that the elderly gentleman before her, with mild blue eyes and innocent mutton-chop whiskers, could be capable of so refined and cruel a revenge, a revenge that savoured rather of Machiavelli and an astute Italian than of the easy morality of the nineteenth century, where a woman solaces her wounded feelings with a fat bundle of bank-notes, and a man consoles himself for his wife's neglect in the mercenary arms of a fashionable actress. Yet there he stood on the hearth-rug in a frivolous modern boudoir, whose walls were hung with blue china and peacocks' feathers, where yellow vases competed for notice on the little crazy Chippendale tables, and a flavour of heliotrope and patchouli, and highly scented flowers pervaded the air. The idea was so thoroughly mediæval, the surroundings so purely modern, that the antithesis almost reached absurdity. But the discrepancy only increased her horror.

'Oh, Hilary! reflect,' she cried in agonized tones.

'You are afraid for your lover?'

'He is not my lover—you know he is not.'

'Do you mean to say that no love passages have passed between you?'

'Yes; before my marriage, not since.'

'Did he not pursue you to Switzerland, even in your honeymoon?'—'But not at my wish.'

'How can I tell? He was there, I saw you together with my own eyes, but I did not believe then what I know now.'

Evelyn sank back in her chair overwhelmed. With such cold obstinacy it was impossible to reason—all she could say would not convince him. And the vengeance he meant to wreak was so neatly and ingeniously planned that she was in duty bound to seem to lend herself to it.

'You will have to appear in the witness-box, and say that you told Carrol about the necklece—how will he like that, I wonder?'

'I—never!' Evelyn started up and her fine eyes sparkled with fire. She was pale, but she was determined; she drew herself to her full height, and flashed contempt at her husband. 'Do you think I will help you in your vile plot? Never! I am perfectly certain Mr. Carrol has nothing whatever to do

with the robbery, if robbery there has been. How do I know it is not all an arranged conspiracy, hatched by you in your mad folly? Mr. Carrol is a *gentleman*!

'And you mean to say I am not? At least I shall guard the honour of my name—that shall not be dragged in the mud. Take care, do not defy me; you think I am easy-going and forgiving; so I am in ordinary matters; you might have had anything in reason you pleased to ask for—you were an old man's darling,' he hissed out these words with concentrated bitterness, 'but you have fooled me, and I never forgive *that*.'

Evelyn shrugged her shoulders and did not answer.

Sir Hilary saw the movement, and it roused him into madness. 'You defy me?' he cried, hoarse with excitement; 'you dare defy me?'

'I do not defy you—I wish you would be calm. You are trying to ruin this young man, and for aught I know you may succeed. What will you be the better for it? If I loved you, you have done me an irreparable wrong by your suspicions; if, on the contrary, I do not love you and wish to deceive you, do you not think you are giving me a powerful excuse by your behaviour?'

'Fine words, nothing but fine words'—Sir Hilary stamped his foot. 'You women are all the same; if one listens to you for a moment one is humbugged. Oh yes! all you say is very plausible no doubt—exceedingly plausible. I must do you the justice, my lady, to say that you speak very well, but—the glamour is gone; you can hoodwink me no longer. Just one thing more, do not try to frustrate the ends of justice, or it will be worse for you; you will only render me the more pitiless, and make your own position unbearable.'

'I think it is unbearable now,' said Evelyn, in quiet despair. She had energy to flash out for a moment, but her natural love of ease soon took the upper hand. She objected no longer. If she could not save Dick it was no use wearing herself out in vain struggles. Sir Hilary had no key to her character. He thought threats and violence were the means necessary to govern refractory women. Having hitherto spoilt her, and treated her with exaggerated courtesy, he now lapsed into the opposite extreme, and allowed a greater scope to his brutality than a less polished person might have dared. The trammels of habit and politeness being removed, there seemed no alternative but unbridled passion; and the passion of jealousy and foiled vanity is stronger than the passion of love—it is more calculating and more thorough.

So Sir Hilary failed to comprehend Evelyn's quietude; he thought she was cowed, when she was only weary and disgusted. She said nothing, but sat, meditatively, with her hands folded in her lap.

'Are you satisfied?' he asked, stopping suddenly in his fierce back-and-forward tramp, 'are you satisfied? If your position is unbearable, what is mine? and yet we are forced to live together for years, as long as I am alive, like this, dragging our miserable galley-slave existence, I knowing all your treachery, you bitterly regretting the loss of your lover!'

'I see nothing that forces us to live together.'

'The laws of society, madam! which I, for my part, do not intend to break. You are my wife, and you shall remain so, and I will exact every inch of your duty towards me!—every inch! You understand?'

'I hear,' said Evelyn passively.

And her very passivity lashed his fury higher. What hold had he over a yielding indifferent woman, who seemed to feel neither sorrow nor anger? Her cold contempt cut him to the core. He was punishing her, and yet she seemed to feel the punishment less than he did himself. His anger got the better of his prudence, in another instant he felt that he must strike her. Perhaps she wished this; perhaps she meant to goad him into some act of unmanly violence. He pressed his lips tightly together; the last few days of emotion had riddled his face with furrows; he looked old and ghastly, instead of ruddier and younger than his age, as he had been wont. He sought to regain his self-control, while that statuesque woman sat on in her silence, braving him, as he thought, by her indifference. He dared not trust himself to speak again; he walked to the door, opened it, and strode out. Evelyn listened to his heavy tread resounding down the passage, then she turned to lift the pug, who was affectionately rubbing himself against her gown, and stroked him absently. What was to be done? Was anything to be done? she asked herself anxiously. Now that the thunderbolt had fallen, it was with a sense of gratitude that Evelyn felt she knew the worst. She knew now what the shadow was she had unconsciously dreaded; she knew the exact measure of Sir Hilary's vengeance, and his intentions towards her. These chiefly occupied her mind. Dick must fight his own battles, and, as he was innocent, he would probably fight them successfully, but she—where could she seek a deliverer! She bethought herself of Miss Fenchurch. The old maid had hitherto been kind though formal.

She had influence with her brother and was devoted to him. It was to her interest to heal this unhappy breach in the family, and it was certainly to her that Evelyn must look for assistance. She rose calmly, too dazed and stunned for tears, and went to the library. Miss Fenchurch was knitting, a bunch of household-keys lay on the table beside her. By degrees she had resumed the charge of the household, Evelyn caring less for supposed authority than for her own ease. Miss Fenchurch looked up as her sister-in-law entered, but without speaking. The room, plainly furnished as a gentleman's library, was dull and homely, the red morocco covers of the chairs faded, the Turkey carpet worn in several places, the heavy furniture old-fashioned, but the large bay window let in every ray of sunshine, and showed a wide sweep of clear blue sky. The general effect was cheerful and comfortable. The library was Miss Fenchurch's favourite resort, and here she sat the greater part of the day knitting, or writing letters, and interviewing servants and poor people. She could never be persuaded to take kindly to Evelyn's boudoir, which she irreverently designated as gimcrack and choke full of rubbish.

'Well, Rachel, are you very busy?' said Evelyn amiably, by way of opening the conversation.

'Busy, I'm always busy; if young people didn't sit idle the devil would not have so much to do.'

'I suppose you mean me, by young people, Rachel?' Evelyn seated herself beside Miss Fenchurch, and watched the plying of the shining needles sending back and forth their unceasing sparkle. 'I wish you would not always preach at me, but say what you have to say straightforwardly.'

'I have nothing to say.' Miss Fenchurch compressed her lips primly. 'I prefer to mind my own business.'

'You are quite right there; but still, you know, Rachel, there are times when people's duty is to mind some one else's business.'

'Indeed!' The old maid knitted faster. Her fingers seemed to fly.

'Don't look as if you didn't care, or were in church, where talking isn't allowed. I want to speak to you.'

'Well, I am listening.'

'Sir Hilary and I have had a quarrel.'

'I am very sorry to hear it. The ladies of this house have always hitherto lived on good terms with their husbands. There has never been any scandal yet.'

'I assure you, I dislike scandal as much as you; but if a

man will not believe you, and flies away at a tangent with some stupid idea he has concocted in his own brain, what is to be done then ?

'It is very unfortunate,' Miss Fenchurch said, without raising her eyes.

'But I want your advice.'

'I have none to give. I do not relish putting my hand between the bark and the tree.'

'If you wish to avert scandal you must. Rachel, be kind to me ; I'm very young, and you are much older and wiser.'

Evelyn laid her cheek gently against Miss Fenchurch's brown serge sleeve. The old maid made an imperceptible gesture as if to shake her off, and replied :

'One cannot require old heads on young shoulders, but one has a right to expect modesty in a young wife.'

'Modesty ! Do you believe——'

'I believe nothing, I know nothing ; I am only stating my opinions.'

'Rachel, I don't wish to quarrel with Hilary.'

'That I can well imagine—you would lose too much.'

'I want you to make it up between us.'

'Then I must decline. It is not my business. Any interference with my brother's private affairs I should consider extremely impertinent.'

'But my affairs concern you.'

'Pardon me, you only concern me as my brother's wife. He is the head of the family, and has a right to my respect.'

'Ah ! then you don't care what happens to me ?'

'I should be sorry if any harm came to you, but at the same time my brother claims my first devotion and duty.'

'And with those cold words, and with that selfish policy, you dismiss me ?'

Miss Fenchurch gave a deprecatory shake of the head.

'Well, then, let me tell you you are taking the most admirable way to secure the scandal of which you spoke just now. I appeal to my husband ; he is blinded by passion, and will not listen. I appeal to my sister-in-law ; she is blinded by prejudiced selfishness, and cannot attend. I am alone, an orphan, young and inexperienced ; you are both of you trying to drive me to destruction.'

'You use hard words. But a woman's own virtue is her best safeguard. I cannot drive you to do anything you do not choose,' said Miss Fenchurch, interrupting her knitting, and for the first time looking straight through her spectacles at Evelyn.

'I forgive you, for I remember you are young, and not accustomed to contradiction ; but you are unjust—another fault of youth, perhaps.'

'If I am wrong,' said Evelyn, throwing herself exhaustedly back in her chair, 'tell me what you wish, what you are aiming at?'

'I wish you and Hilary to live on good, affectionate, and peaceable terms, as husband and wife should—as my father and mother did.'

'Perhaps your father and mother were not tried as I am,' said Evelyn impatiently.

'No one is spared all annoyance ; no doubt they had their troubles, but they bore them like gentlefolks, quietly, patiently, nobly.'

'Hilary is not gentle ; Hilary is not patient.'

'My dear, you must understand that the wrong under which Hilary suffers is not one a man can bear patiently ; men's feelings are different from ours ; they are stronger, more human perhaps—we cannot judge. Hilary loves you.'

'Does he ?' answered Evelyn bitterly. 'I do not think so, or he would believe what I say.'

'Men are hard to convince.'—'Can't you help me ?'

'There is no help possible, that I can see, but to subdue your pride, and to cast yourself upon my brother's mercy.'

'He has no mercy, and you have no heart, or you would feel for a poor girl like me, who has no one to advise her, and is very unhappy.'

Evelyn jumped up as she spoke and turned to the window. She could scarcely restrain her tears, but her pride would not permit her to shed them in the presence of one who arrogated to herself rather the right to condemn, than the privilege of soothing a grief she could not understand. She gazed out of the window. The garden, with its neat brown beds, where the crocus heads showed little green tips, stretched peacefully before her ; blackbirds pecked on the grassy lawn, and a fine thrush flew past at that moment. Leaves were beginning to burgeon, worms and insects to emerge from their long winter slumber ; there was a spring-like vigour and anticipation in the air, and she alone stood like some poor criminal waiting to be lectured and advised.

'I strongly recommend you to be meek and humble ; it is far more appropriate in a woman. You will disarm my brother by submission, and you can never hope to battle against his will. His determination, his energy, is greater than yours ;

though an elderly man, he is hale and hearty, and has all the vigour of youth; a woman must be defeated in any real contest with a man in the position of my brother. Believe me, give in now, and you will live to see the justice of my counsel.' Miss Fenchurch droned on in a flatly monotonous voice.

'And if I humiliate myself, what then—what can you promise me?' A vision of peace crossed Evelyn's mind for an instant; if the price were not too heavy, perhaps she would pay it, and restore to herself her comforts, her ease, her husband's indulgence. 'What can you promise me?'

'Forgiveness and, in time, reinstallation into favour. Those are reasonable terms.'

'And meanwhile to be treated like a culprit, to be watched and suspected and scolded; for I know he would find fault, and you too, in your cold, reproving fashion. No, no, I had rather manage my own affairs; only remember this, whatever happens, Hilary's obstinacy and your want of sympathy have driven me to it.'—'Hilary's obstinacy!'

No one had ever spoken so disrespectfully of her brother before; the old maid clasped her hands in horror, and peered over the top of her spectacles, but Evelyn did not stay to hear the comment on her daring speech. She opened the window and let herself out into the garden, where, to complete her utter infringement of all the rules of propriety, she ran along the gravelled paths bonnetless.

'Young folks, young folks!' muttered the old maid to herself. 'God grant us grace to be patient with them.'

It was then that Evelyn decided to send for Dick, and to write the letter which reached him a few days later.

CHAPTER XXX.

LOVERS NO LONGER.

THE fir plantation was an extremely secluded spot about a mile and a half from Oakdene, and especially suitable for a secret meeting. To approach it, it was necessary to traverse some rough, boggy common land, broken by shallow streamlets, where sedges and coarse grasses flourished luxuriantly. In the summer-time the foreground lay bathed in a rich glow of purple and violet heather; in the winter the cold north wind shrieked and whistled over the bare, brown hillsides, which showed dark against the chilly sky. Beyond the common was the fir planta-

tion, to which a winding, sandy road gave access. Following this road for a short distance, and turning to the left along a narrow foot-track, you suddenly came to a slope where, viewed through a columned vista of red pine-stems, cool green woods bounded the horizon. Under these pine-trees, where the earth was dry and strewn with an aromatic carpet of fir-needles, and the air gently moaned in a kind of suave harmony among the tree-tops, was the spot chosen by Evelyn to meet her lover. Above, the sky was clear and blue; around, the whispering greenwood wrapped them in an enchanted mantle of slumbrous silence; no profane eye could peer in unobserved, no profane ear surprise their talk.

Dick knew the spot; he had ridden that way as a short cut from West Thorpe to the other side of the county, and he had always admired the straight and splendid proportions of the thick-leaved pines. But it was with deep reluctance that he obeyed Evelyn's commands to-day. His own position was extremely irksome and precarious, he did not desire to rouse Sir Hilary's anger by clandestine meetings, and the business of the election rendered it very difficult for him to absent himself even for a few hours; besides this, idle dalliance was at that instant far enough from his thoughts. Fair as a woman may be and desirable as she may seem, yet if she intrudes herself upon his notice at a moment when her presence evokes unpleasant memories, or her interests require special self-denial or exertion on his part, there is scarcely any young man who will not immediately experience a decided cooling off in his amorous inclinations. An unwilling lover is colder than a person who is no lover at all—he is more selfish, more cautious, more exacting. The right diapason is always difficult to catch; the moment a woman leans towards a man, that moment he starts back. Dick was engaged; he did not love Luce, but he felt that with her was happiness and safety—pecuniary advantage even, if Mr. Highview, as was most likely, dowered her liberally; with Lady Fenchurch, on the contrary, he faced only disgrace, fear, and snatched hours of bliss, which, conferred against his will, might turn into endless spaces of torment. Still he never thought of shrinking from the consequences of his own undisciplined emotions, he never for an instant suggested to himself that he could desert the woman he had loved so deeply; he only desired that propitious circumstances might render self-sacrifice unnecessary, for, above all, whatever his faults, Dick was a gentleman—that is to say, his innate nobleness forbade him to injure a woman. He had a chivalrous regard

for the fair sex, and, indeed, would not have hurt a hair of anyone's head could he have avoided it. But the consequences of our actions do not seem the less bitter because we have drawn them on ourselves; the apple of love is as much dead-sea fruit when we have at the cost of infinite pain stretched out our hand to seize it, as when it has been merely thrust into our unwilling hands. When Dick rode up to the fir plantation he wished women, love, and marriage at the devil, he wished he had never seen Evelyn, and he fervently wished that she would have arranged her own affairs with her husband and left him peaceably to pursue his own adventures. Moodily he climbed the sandy road, where he tied his horse to a strong young fir-tree. Even the soft and quiet beauty of the spot scarcely reconciled him to the odious half-hour that was in store. Shafts of light flashed through the deep green branches, and shot the tender mosses with gold, and the bright red stems with deeper colour. Down in the hollow the firs and evergreens formed masses of glossy vivid green, and the branches, moving softly, sighed and whispered above his head. On a bank of heather, dry as was everything under the broad canopy of the pine-trees, he found Evelyn, looking prettier than ever in her dark furs and hat with scarlet-tipped feathers, waiting for him.

'I am in time, surely,' he said, pulling out his watch as she stretched forth her hand to him.

'Oh, yes, yes; I was too soon—I was anxious.'

'Do you know it was very imprudent of you to come here?' he said, looking suspiciously round; 'we may be watched.'

She had sunk back again on the mossy seat; he stood uneasily in front of her. They certainly did not seem like a pair of lovers, and yet nothing could well be more compromising than their interview. 'I felt that I must see you,' she answered sadly. The positions were reversed. She, who had been queen, who had held him at arm's length from the height of her grace and dignity, now humbly sued for an attention which he only gave her grudgingly, coldly, and abstractedly.

'What had you to say?' he asked, resigning himself to the inevitable, and sitting beside her on the mossy bank.

'How changed you are,' she said softly, without a trace of her usual gay coquetry; 'how changed! I scarcely think you still love me.'

'Listen!' he said. 'In a day or two comes the polling, I am over head and ears in business; thanks to your—husband and his vile accusations, I shall probably lose the election and perhaps my grandmother's fortune; everything at this instant

is trembling in the balance, another week may see me a ruined man ; is this the time to talk of love ?

‘I am unhappy,’ she said simply ; ‘and through you—through your imprudence and folly——’

‘So am I unhappy. God knows I curse myself for my folly—I have been idiotic—mad—accept my deep regret—still, how can I help you ?’

‘Oh, Dick, say a kind word to me, think what you used to protest and vow—how you told me I was dearer to you than anything on earth—think what you asked me in Switzerland.’

‘I was a fool,’ he said roughly. ‘You were wise then—why not let us be wise now ?’

‘Because my life is wretched—because my husband suspects me, and hates me, and because I have none but *you*, Dick.’ He did not answer ; he looked moodily on the ground, and made little holes in the moss with his riding-cane. The tears coursed down Evelyn’s cheeks as she spoke, clear pearl-like tears streaming from those beautiful brown eyes which it had been his privilege to compare to stars. ‘You cannot desert me,’ she said, with a sob.

‘Of course, I shall not leave you in any difficulty ; of course, we must support each other—though I don’t see what good I can be to you—why, for instance, run this unnecessary risk ?—if your husband surprised you here with me, what would he say ?—it would justify all his suspicions.’

‘He is gone into West Thrope, and is not likely to come here. Oh, Dick, I do not understand you.’ Dick scarcely understood himself, he only knew that the former fascination of beauty left him calm and impassive, that even the tears which dropped from her star-like eyes irritated instead of melting him, and that it was with difficulty he restrained himself from addressing rough words to her, and reproving her for the folly, which was leading him and herself into danger.

‘Did you only wish to see me in order to ask me to stand by you ? Surely you know me well enough to know I should behave honourably in the matter ; or did you think me a thief—shall I swear to you that I am innocent ?’

‘As if I did not know that—of course you are—but we are both terribly unfortunate—however, never mind that now, what is done, is done ; don’t look so gloomy, talk to me a little, I want to be comforted.’ Dick’s handsome face was clouded with annoyance ; a man hates to feel he has committed an egregious mistake ; his eyes were still bent on the ground and

the holes with which the moss at his feet was now perforated. He was restless, unhappy, dissatisfied with himself and his companion.

‘Dick, Dick, have you no heart?’ she proceeded reproachfully. ‘Don’t you feel for me? remember how happy I used to be before I met you;’ the tears coursed down again faster.

‘Don’t cry, pray don’t cry, I can’t bear to see you unhappy,’ he said, with a clumsy attempt at sympathy.

‘Can’t you really?’ she answered more cheerfully, looking up and drying her eyes. ‘Am I still precious to you? if I were alone and friendless would you not forsake me? if Sir Hilary is too dreadfully cruel, and makes my life a penance, would you care for me and help me?’

‘It is far better we should not meet again—don’t you see why? Sir Hilary is an old man, in the course of nature he cannot live long, I think it is your duty to try and please him and get on well——’

‘You never spoke like that in the old days,’ she said, opening her eyes with surprise. ‘I tell you I am miserable, *miserable*; you don’t know what that house is like, how gloomy, how dull, how dreary. I wander about without a soul to speak to all day.’ Her voice had a ring of passion mixed with the sorrow.

‘Lady Fenchurch, you possess carriages, and servants, and friends, and you can pay visits——’

‘Lady Fenchurch!—oh—then you have quite forgotten everything.’

‘I have not forgotten that you begged me never to call you Evelyn again.’

‘That is all changed now; I never expected Sir Hilary would turn out a Tartar.’

‘And I never expected you would care for my attentions again. You spurned them once. You snubbed me.’ The young man’s voice grew hard and bitter; he was working himself up to a sense of injury—it is so much easier to quarrel with a person under a feeling of angry grievance—‘and now I am engaged to be married.’

‘Yes, to a plain girl whom you don’t love.’

Lady Fenchurch’s eyes flashed. She looked supremely handsome.—‘I respect and like her extremely.’

‘And you are content with that? I compliment you; you are more easily pleased than in the old days.’

‘You yourself taught me not to regret the old days.’

Evelyn was silent. She never contemplated the possibility that Dick might change. She had felt so sure of her own

influence, her unchallenged supremacy, that she thought to play with him, to cast him from her, and to bring him to her feet again without difficulty. She despised the power poor Luce could wield, and believed that her star must pale whenever handsome Evelyn willed it so. Dick's coldness puzzled and annoyed her. She forgot her grief for a moment in her desire to win him back ; she deployed the witchery and charm that had drawn him to her formerly ; she ceased complaints, and sought to bring a smile to his lips. And at last she succeeded. Dick was human. He was not impervious to woman's wiles and to the magnet of persuasive beauty.

'And you do love me a little bit still ; you haven't forgotten me quite ; you will befriend me and serve me when I need it, and I ask you ?' she said after a while, triumphantly.

'Certainly I will ; I have promised you this ; but pray do not be reckless, remember how horribly precarious my situation is, and how very happy and comfortable you are at Oakdene.'

'Not while Sir Hilary torments me,' said Evelyn with a pout.

'Well, try your best to be conciliatory ; pray, for my sake ; what should we do, you and I, cast adrift upon the world without a penny ?'—'You only think of yourself.'

'No, indeed ; I think of you.' He glanced at her tasteful dress, her pretty hat, and her delicately gloved hands. 'You are not fitted for poverty ; I could not bear to see you without proper comforts, fragile and tender as you are ; believe me, let us try to avert such a calamity at any price.'

'To be with me a calamity ?' she looked prettily reproachful.

'No ; but a calamity for you to be unhappy, dear.'

'Ah, you speak very kindly and considerately,' she said, in a discouraged voice ; 'but I believe you do not care for me, really. I am a burden ; you wish to be rid of me.'

He assured her somewhat lamely she was mistaken, but Evelyn was too clever to be easily deceived.

These two people in one of the most solemn and critical moments of their lives played a game of finessing and skill together, trying to conceal the true thoughts of their hearts by the unreal words on their lips. Neither was happy, but each tried to reassure the other. Neither believed in the other, and both sought to drown the suspicion as it rose. Her vanity, her love of luxury and admiration, prompted her to desire his allegiance ; his selfishness taught him to profess the affection he could not feel. A melancholy ending surely to the bright dream of love they had both once nursed. A sufficient proof, had one been needed, that love based on self can never stand

the stress of tribulation. The woman, beautiful and perfect in her hour of prosperity, seemed to him now but a poor toy for which to risk all ; she, perhaps, of the two, was least actuated by sordid motives ; for, though she sought assistance from him, she really experienced the kindness and sympathy he only professed. Spite of himself Dick felt the difference in the love of the two women who competed for his heart—the love of Luce and the love of Evelyn. He saw that the one was pure and guileless, the other polluted with self-interest. And as they parted affectionately in appearance, he thought, ‘ Provided only she will consent to be sensible and cease to make fresh difficulties and discords, and just let these evil times pass over till something fortunate occurs.’ And she said to herself, ‘ If I can only regain my old hold over him so that he shall not desert me, but be ever there ; a protector in case of need, a resource in moments of dullness, provided I can show him this is his duty, so that I may trust to his sense of honour.’ And under the still solemn trees in the sweet hush of nature they parted, their hearts full of wild and bitter thoughts. She glided off with her graceful dainty movements through the trees away into the blue distance, to the home which was now wretched and discordant, and left her lover alone, unhappy, disappointed, tied and bound in honour to the woman who had become to him a burden and a torment.

CHAPTER XXXI.

BRUCE FEELS LONELY.

BRUCE sat writing at the little old mahogany table in the inn window surrounded by books and papers, his brow clouded with thought. Occasionally he dropped his pen, and looked out on to the narrow street, busy with market-carts and gay with foot-passengers wending their careless way along. But his gaze was the abstract gaze of the thinker who knows and sees nothing of the common world around him ; he noticed none of the little street scenes, the universal comedies, the dramas of life and passion being enacted before him. For him the ideal surpassed the actual. His thoughts were introspective, inductive ; he was seeking to reconstruct the past, to evolve from the fragments that survived a perfect picture of a long-vanished state of society. And so long as his thoughts were thus busily occupied, his brain active, his heart dormant,

so long he was happy. Sometimes, however, when his dull weary brain flagged, the pen fell from his nerveless hand, the tired limbs relaxed their cramped attitude, and nature reasserted herself over intellect—then the shadow of a great loneliness fell upon him, and he sighed unconsciously. The life of the intellect is splendid, but it is incomplete; the sage himself is wise because he knows this. Pascal, abjuring the love of woman, cast himself in abject adoration at the feet of a great and terrible God; Goethe compelled his weighty intellect to toy with the simple worship of a child. The common passions of humanity could not content such men; their aspirations—seeking, groping blindly—soared ever higher and higher until they accepted loneliness; the solitude of the spirit is the earnest and penalty of genius. The great thinker, the great reformer, must ever be lonely; it is only on the bleak heights—the storm-swept mountain-top—that the eagle builds his eyrie. He feels a void, but perhaps in that void lies his greatness, the future in its germ; or perhaps it is but the natural craving of the flesh for gratification, the rebelling of the material against the immaterial, the gentle reminder that we are human. Be that as it may, Bruce was human, though he had a great intellect and a supreme love of work, and he occasionally felt lonely, felt so especially when he looked around and compared his fate with that of others—bright, busy butterflies, to whom love and happiness seemed to come without effort or desire. It needed merely that they should be good-looking, young, and easy-tempered, and the world's benefits were showered in their laps. They toiled not, neither did they spin; but others toiled and spun for them, and they reaped the benefit. They were not troubled either by fears, forebodings, or anxiety such as beset other men, and in their security lay their strength. They faced the world bravely, unquestioningly, with faith and hope, and faith and hope never proved barren. Dick, for instance, how had he deserved the love of a woman like Luce, whose heart-strings might crack in the terrible strain to which they were subjected, but who would remain true to the core? And friends, too—what kept Bruce devoted to him, so that even his own work suffered while he laboured for his friend? Was it Dick's insouciance, was it his careless friendship, a friendship so lukewarm that for years it had not seemed to him worth while to seek out the humble, toiling student? Vague and unsatisfactory as the answers to these questions might be, Bruce felt that Dick could rest secure in his affection, and in that of his old grandmother, who in her simple fashion

loved and trusted him implicitly. Bruce argued to himself that he advocated friendship as a duty, a privilege and a pleasure ; that the object was independent of the method of application ; that love for one special person meant but the focussing into one point of the general love of humanity. He took up his pen again with rigid determination, and wrote on continuously till the door opened and admitted Dick, heated, wearied, and somewhat cross. A compulsory love-scene possesses some special quality of acrid irritation. Dick felt angry with himself and angry with Evelyn for exposing him to self-contempt.

‘Dick, I have wanted you,’ said Bruce cheerfully, looking up from his work with a gentle smile ; ‘there is still so much to be done, and Mr. Highview will be here shortly. Have you lunched ?’

‘Yes—no,’ Dick threw himself on to a sofa ; ‘I don’t want any luncheon.’

‘Have you thought about your speech to-night ? a good deal will depend upon that.’

‘I’m sick of this speechifying,’ said Dick, rubbing his fingers through his hair : ‘I shall be heartily glad when it’s all over. I don’t care a fig whether I get in or not now.’

Julian sighed ; after the pains bestowed on his pupil, such an answer could scarcely be considered satisfactory.

‘Oh yes, I hear you sigh, and know all you are going to say. You’re always scribbling, and I’m ungrateful, and a sinner, and everything that is bad. Don’t you ever mean to stop working, Julian ?’

‘How can I ? there is so much to do. I suppose when I am dead it will be said of me, “He died learning.”’

‘Why the deuce do you talk of dying ? I don’t know what’s come to you, old fellow ; you’re gloomy enough for anything. I suppose it is being with me—I’m certainly not cheerful.’

‘You are naturally anxious,’ remarked Bruce.

‘I’m not anxious about the election, but the thought of disgrace, of a jail, is never absent from my mind.’

‘I have not much fear of that ; but now come let us discuss your speech.’

‘What a friend you are, Julian, I wish I had half your energy,’ said Dick, still not moving from the sofa. ‘I can’t get up any interest in politics.’

‘No interest in politics ? Why, they are all-important, the first duty of a citizen ; the most engrossing study a man can devote himself to.’

‘Your ideas are not of the usual order ; as a rule politics

means ambition, and the advantages a man can get for himself from a government or a party,' said Dick lazily.

'True ; perhaps you are too young to care for these things yet. I suppose love occupies all your thoughts now.'

'Love ! I hate the sound of the word.'

'Indeed, then, I am at a loss how to prescribe ; love palls upon you, patriotism leaves you cold.'

'We have not mentioned patriotism ; I suppose I should fight for my country if I were a soldier ; in fact, I think that is what I am best fitted for.'

'Patriotism means love of country ; to be a good citizen one must have public feeling ; what is that but politics ? we are arguing in a circle.'

'You will say next, that to vote at an election is a kind of religion.'

'Not religion, but a part of it. Citizenship is as important a factor in public life as family life, and, though religion cannot make you clever, it ought to teach you to be an honest man. It is the divorce in the code of principle between private life and public life that causes all the mischief. People do not choose to see the political significance of certain rules of action, and thus in trying to be loyal to their party they become faithless to their own soul.'

'I never think of my soul especially,' remarked Dick. 'There is time enough for that.'

'Saving your soul does not mean going to church and mumbling long prayers ; it means keeping it pure, and true, and untroubled, and that is as necessary for a politician as a sinner, perhaps more necessary, for there is such a thing as the conventional political conscience—a composite article made up of bribes, prejudices, compromises, and expediency.'

'A kind of old man of the sea, I suppose ! Thank Heaven I have no conscience.'

'Don't say such things. I never believe men who boast of their vices. What I meant to say was, that ecclesiastical tendencies may be wrong, old-fashioned, or harmful ; Christian feeling never.'

'I did not know you were a bigot, Julian. I thought you preferred history to the Thirty-nine Articles.'

'Did I speak of the Thirty-nine Articles ? My religion teaches me to believe in the omnipotence of the principle of good, in the joy of doing, and the reality of truth. Religious men have neglected politics, they have allowed them to become the arena of all bad passions, of the strife and clash of envy and

discontent. 'They have wrapped themselves in the mantle of indifference, and thanked God they were not as other men ; they have ignored the love of their country, and forgotten the rich promise of the future bequeathed us by our fathers ; they——'

'Stop, my dear fellow ! I must think of my speech, and you are giving me a sermon.'

Bruce laughed. Warmed with his subject, and carried away in an excess of enthusiasm, he forgot that he was speaking aloud, in a language that seemed Greek to the young man beside him. He checked himself, and patiently produced a clean sheet of foolscap and a pencil, and handed them to Dick, who condescended to shake himself like a great sleepy bear, and to rise and walk up and down the room cigar in mouth, a practice that he said assisted the brain. Julian threw in a word or suggested a sentiment occasionally, and the speech was progressing fairly when Mr. Highview knocked at the door. He was accompanied by Gubbins as lively and alert as ever.

'Well, how goes it ?' said Mr. Highview. 'Working, I perceive ; that's right. I like to see young men in earnest.'

Dick made a face, and Gubbins remarked, 'I'm very hopeful now, very hopeful. Sir Hilary's last speeches have been extremely wild, his conduct strange ; seems to have lost his head ; people are disgusted with him ; they think that attack of his upon you a mean business.'

'They don't believe it then ?' said Dick, looking up quickly.

'Believe it ! bless you, no—put it down to an election dodge. The thing was so unlikely.'

'After all, Dick, there is some good in being a gentleman,' interposed Mr. Highview kindly. 'Thanks to Luce's persuasion he had espoused Dick's cause far more warmly than he had ever thought possible. With some difficulty he disposed of Lady Eleanor's entreaties that he would stand himself for Parliament, and entered heart and soul into the young man's prospects.'

'We'll pull you through, my boy !' he said heartily. 'We'll pull you through !'

'Inspire him with a sense of responsibility, Mr. Highview,' said Bruce gravely. 'He is not earnest enough ; tell him his duty to his country demands an effort.'

'Oh yes, of course, duty to your country, and all that you know, it sounds well, not but what a man's own interests are generally the stronger influence.'

'Bruce talks as if a politician were a kind of high priest,' said Dick, with a smile.

'Ah yes, quite right ; Church and State, though I am not myself what is usually called a religious man, never was troubled with doubts, always went to church as an example—but I can't stand too much of the parsons ; they're narrow, you know, Bruce, very narrow,' said Mr. Highview promptly.

'And we are not narrow,' put in Gubbins. 'Breadth is the guiding principle of the Liberal party, breadth in views, breadth in doctrine, breadth in practice, liberty in unity, you know, widen wherever you can, pull down barriers to progress, enlightened catholic views, respect for the individual, and all that kind of thing.'

'Take care lest in widening everything you yourselves and your party slip through the breach, and are swallowed up in a wave of devastation,' said Mr. Highview.

'Devastation, my dear sir ? It is we who preserve the liberties of the people ; every man's prerogative is sacred to us—we are no respecters of persons.'

'Quite so,' said Bruce ; 'there ought to be no opposition between the ideas of freedom and order ; unfortunately, history teaches us that in doing battle for the one, men are frequently arrayed against the other.'

'History !' said Mr. Gubbins, jumping up, 'I don't care two pins for history ; it's actuality, the practical, that matters. Why, sir, I have a map of all the constituencies—the Liberal electors are increasing everywhere ; I mark them red, the red threatens to cover the whole of the map. That's a truer criterion than your mouldy one-side histories. How can any man write impartially ? It stands to reason, each of us is a partizan of our own side, we shouldn't be men if we weren't ; well, then, how can you believe history ? it only represents the opinions of the writers.'

'Mr. Bruce here is a historian.'

'Indeed, sir ! well, I beg your pardon if I've hurt your feelings, but at least you are a Liberal, so your history is sure to be all right and satisfactory.'

'Now, now to business,' said Mr. Highview impatiently ; 'we did not come to talk of history, but to do business. What is the programme—what has to be done to-day ?'

Mr. Gubbins immediately rose to the occasion, he put on the confidential agent's air, and explained the dangers, the necessities, and the advantages of the situation. He knew which voter was shaky and which could be depended upon ; his dodges and resources were inhaustible, his fertility of invention unbounded.

'Most valuable person, most valuable,' whispered Mr. Highview to Dick; 'is as familiar with the voters as a musician with the keys of his instrument. I assure you he will pull you through if any man can. Your friend there is a charming fellow, but a bit of a visionary; no use being visionary, great thing is to be practical. That's where Lady Eleanor excels; wonderful practical woman, far-reaching views, an unfailing instinct, almost second-sight, I call it! She picked you out at once as a promising candidate.'

'I am afraid she has lost her faith in me,' said Dick, stealing a look at Bruce and the agent who were mutually buttonholing one another in the corner. 'I do not expect she takes much interest in my success or failure now.'

'You are mistaken; nothing pleases Lady Eleanor like success. If you become our member, I myself will take you to her triumphantly. I can promise you a favourable reception and my niece's hand as well. That's worth working for, eh? Luce is much attached to you, very much; a quiet girl, but a good girl, though I say it, eh?'

'You are too kind.' Dick flushed. The thought of Lady Fenchurch started to his memory and poisoned the pleasure good Mr. Highview's encouragement would have afforded him. What did it matter if Luce were good and loving? she could be nothing more to him now. He was bound in honour to stand by Lady Fenchurch, to shelter and protect her in the unhappy position to which his own folly and her vanity had led her. He passed his hand across his brow. Mr. Highview saw the action and attributed it to weariness and discouragement. 'I believe you will be member yet. I really do,' he said. 'The Conservatives have not a chance just now. Sir Hilary has done himself harm by his vindictiveness; there is moderation in all things, and to take out warrants against gentlemen is positively unpardonable. Lady Eleanor thinks so too; she is far more amiably inclined towards you now than I had ever hoped; she has a fine judgment, a very fine judgment, and she is really partial to you, is my lady. It all depends upon you now, my boy. You must pull yourself together, and show energy.'

'Yes, I will do my best,' said Dick, preparing to follow the agent and Bruce who were already half way down stairs.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MRS. VINCENT DECIDES FOR HERSELF.

'WELL?' said Mrs. Vincent, the same day, interrogatively to her husband, when in muddy riding-boots and splashed coat he entered the room.

'Well! I have been in the town and heard the last news. I believe Dick has as good a chance as ever.'

'Impossible!' Mrs. Vincent laid down her work and looked meditatively at Dolly and Eliza's brown heads, whispering and nodding together, as usual, in a corner.

'Leave the room, my dears, and go and see if Granny wants anything.'

Dolly and Eliza departed, obediently, to grumble together, outside the door, at the hardship of being prevented from hearing an interesting conversation between their elders.

'Is it about an elopement, do you think?' said Dolly, who was inclined to be romantic. 'I caught the word "disgraceful love affair" yesterday between papa and mamma.'

'It is more likely to be something about money,' answered Eliza, who was of a practical turn of mind; 'perhaps we shall not get any new frocks.'

'Love has nothing to do with money,' persisted Dolly; 'I know I am right about the love affair.'

'It's "much ado about nothing," then,' said Eliza contemptuously, 'I'll be bound, mamma always makes mysteries about trifles. It's just like the fuss she gets into when we read novels without asking. Why Mary Jones at the Rectory lends me all "Ouida's" and Miss Broughton's books, and mamma is none the wiser if I read them in bed and keep them under my pillow.'

'You always were sly,' retorted Dolly. 'Come along now or mamma will pounce out upon us. Perhaps Granny will give us something if we ask her.'

'You're a regular sponge,' said her sister, always trying to see how much you can get, and yet your frocks are invariably stained before mine, and you are never fit to be seen.'

'Hush now,' said Dolly, drawing her away.

Granny still spent most of her time in her bedroom; she had never recovered the shock caused by Mrs. Vincent's rudely blabbing out the story of the warrant and by Dick's departure. The slender thread of life had been sorely jarred and still quivered and vibrated painfully. Granny did not suffer except from weakness; her serene temperament reasserted itself, her

calm mind remained clear as ever, but the old lady's constitution had received a blow from which it might never rally. She needed the most tender and delicate handling, and Mrs. Vincent's treatment, though doubtless correct and moral, was somewhat drastic. She scolded Granny if she cried, she exhorted her when she was sad and silent, she reproved her for sighing, and ordered her to sit still and inactive for fear of over-fatigue, when on the contrary moderate and interesting occupation would have distracted her thoughts and assisted her recovery. Granny left her bed, but she was too weak to care to drive or walk, and she spent the greater part of her time in an armchair reading or working. Dolly and Eliza usually sat beside her. Their constant companionship proved a little wearisome to the old lady, who was accustomed to solitude for many hours in the day, but the fear of appearing ungracious, and her exquisite tact, enabled her to endure the young ladies' society with a smile. Luce had been over to see her again, but under Lady Eleanor's escort, which considerably detracted from the pleasure of her visit, and she and Granny had been permitted only the shortest of *tête-à-têtes*. However in this brief space Luce found an opportunity to deliver Dick's message, his expression of contrition for the past and promise of good behaviour for the future.

'Dear fellow,' said Granny, wiping her eyes; 'I knew his heart was good. If he has done anything wrong, Luce, it was rather from want of thought than heartlessness. Mrs. Vincent will not give him credit for anything, but I am sure her sons have faults too.'

'We must have patience,' said Luce caressingly.

'Yes, my dear, but you forget I am old; if I should not live to see him righted——'

'Do not think about that,' said Luce, kissing her again. 'Have faith in the future.'

And the old lady tried to cultivate faith, though she was sorely exercised by the condition of things in the household at Long Leam.

As soon as Dolly and Eliza had closed the door Mrs. Vincent began again:

'Surely the people will not be so mad as to elect a man who has committed a felony.'

'They do not believe it,' said Uncle Vincent gloomily; 'sometimes I myself think it is a mistake; Dick always was a gentleman. I wish I had not yielded to your advice and taken part against him. I believe it was wrong, Maria.'

‘Tut, tut!’ Mrs. Vincent’s pale face flushed and she pressed her thin lips tightly together. She was playing a dangerous game and a difficult game, but it was in a good cause. Mrs. Vincent comforted herself with the thought that she was an irreproachable wife and a devoted mother. All that she did was for the children’s sake; her very faults became good qualities when viewed in the pleasing light of maternal love.

But her husband’s weakness and vacillation irritated her. If people worked for their families, as they were bound to do, silly scruples must stand aside, obstacles that hindered success must be brushed away. Dick was an obstacle, and, if he suffered in the process, his feelings and interests were of no importance compared with the object she had in view. Great conquerors regarded humanity in the mass; individuals probably endured hardships and injustice, but the aggregate sum of good must alone be considered in the result. Mrs. Vincent looked upon herself in the light of a great conqueror; she laid her plans carefully; she marched relentlessly on where she had decided, and crushed the opposition that dared to rear its head. A singular chance had toppled over Dick’s position; she had not sought it, nor intrigued for it, but when the opportunity presented itself she seized it greedily. Mrs. Vincent was a great stickler for duty; her duty towards her children occupied a large share of her thoughts, and she was inflexible in its pursuit. To this end she lost no occasion of impressing Granny with her convictions, keeping well before her the iniquity of bequeathing property to a young man who was a spendthrift and a gambler on the turf, and stood in imminent danger of becoming a convicted felon. She knew Mrs. Carrol’s fears and her carefulness lest she should not make proper use of the gifts conferred upon her husband, and of the uncontrolled responsibility with which he had invested her. She traded upon this holy feeling, and talked, as she well knew how, of duty and self-sacrifice, until poor Granny sometimes put her hands to her aching head and cried out in despair. But she could not so easily manage her husband. Though unscrupulous and devoid of moral feeling, he had all a man’s natural contempt for crooked ways; he did not object to ruining Dick, but he would have preferred to fight openly. Though he blustered and swore, moreover, he was a coward at heart, and his wife knew it and took advantage of her knowledge. It was cowardice that prompted him to deny all knowledge of the cheque Dick had cashed at his own request. He accused no one, he simply kept silence, which served the purpose amply. He feared to confess to his wife his

folly in buying a racehorse that had broken down ; he cherished the letter in which Dick had talked of the purchase, and believed there was no one to prove that Vincent had ever owned it. All transactions had passed in Dick's name, and his uncle flattered himself he had thus procured immunity in case of disaster. But his conscience, rather a composite mixture of fear and cunning than any real moral coercion, left him little peace. He wondered that Dick had not attacked and defied him more openly. He expected every day that the blow would come, and that, spite of all the fine words and excuses with which he armed himself, he would be exposed and undone. He was afraid of his wife, a far cooler and subtler plotter than himself ; he was afraid of Dick, for whom he entertained a sneaking partiality and sporting comradeship ; but he was honest to neither. Of the two, he preferred to throw in his lot with Mrs. Vincent, who would profit him most, and was most difficult to deal with. As he talked to her now, warming himself in front of the fire, with the kind of feeling that ease gave him security, and looked at her cold hard face, her determined eye, and the strong bony hands—which never for an instant ceased from their busy plying of the needle in some household work, at which she was an adept and found it her pleasure to excel—he thought her a woman not to be tampered with. Breathing a sigh, he gave up Dick to his fate, even while he remembered the sunny insouciant nature of the young man, and the kindness and good-nature he had always shown him.

‘If only the warrant had been served !’ said Mrs. Vincent regretfully. ‘Sir Hilary’s supineness is unpardonable. You ought to stir him up ; but you are never any use except with horses.’

Uncle Vincent did not answer. He was conscious of having made a muddle of the very business in which his wife gave him credit for successful management.

‘Have you seen Sir Hilary ?’ she asked again, knitting her brows. ‘Isn’t he jealous ? What’s the matter with the creature ? Did you tell him all the gossip there was about his wife and Dick ? If he can pass that over, he is less of a man even than I thought.’

‘I said what I could ; I hinted at imprudences.’

‘Hinted !’ said his wife contemptuously ; ‘plain speaking alone is of use. A woman would not have made such a hash of it. If Dick gets into Parliament our chance is lost. Always strike while the iron is hot, and when a man is down.’

‘That is not what we learnt at Eton,’ said Vincent, with a smile ; ‘we should have called that mean conduct.’

‘I am not referring to boys, but to men and women. Do you realize that, unless Dick is disgraced, every farthing goes away to him? He will marry Luce, who is fool enough to care for him to an extent which is positively indecent, and will not listen to a word against him. Your children will be beggars, but you never think of them; you will have to give up your horses, drink beer instead of wine, and deny yourself even a little bet on the Derby winner. You have been extravagant, and the children’s expenses increase every day. A man must look all these things in the face before, just for some Quixotic ideas, he sacrifices such a chance as we have got now. Providence, no doubt, willed the inheritance to go away from Dick, or he would not have been permitted to find himself in such a predicament.’

‘I wonder who *did* steal the necklace?’ said Uncle Vincent reflectively.

‘Dick, of course, and Lady Fenchurch assisted him.’

‘I can scarcely think it of him.’

‘Can’t you? I can,’ Mrs. Vincent sneered. ‘He was in difficulties, he told her, she was in love with him—it is all as plain as a pikestaff. If one could only induce Sir Hilary to take some step.’

‘He can scarcely accuse his own wife.’

‘Why not? I dare say she and Dick meet constantly. Why does he not watch her, or lay a trap for her? Women of that sort deserve no mercy.’

‘They do meet,’ said Vincent slowly, ‘for as I was riding past the fir plantation to-day I saw him come out, and I caught sight of a petticoat fluttering off in the opposite direction.’

‘You did!’ Mrs. Vincent’s eyes expressed pleased surprise. ‘You are more observant than I believed. There is your chance; you must enlighten the poor man about his wife’s conduct.’

‘No, no, Maria, I cannot do that,’ he said, shrinking away a little.

‘Why not, pray? It is your duty. You are saving the honour of a good old name.’

‘I believe in the truth of the proverb, “Let sleeping dogs lie.” I might burn my fingers.’

‘Nothing venture, nothing have,’ retorted his wife. ‘How can you be so cowardly?’

‘I am not cowardly; I am prudent.’

‘And your prudence will ruin your family.’

‘Women don’t understand these things,’ said Uncle Vincent impatiently. ‘There are certain words one can say, and others that no man in his senses ever utters. Why should I interfere between man and wife?’

‘Think of the shame. Dick ruined and Lady Fenchurch disgraced. The fast, immoral hussy! it will serve her right. There can be no marriage with Luce then; even *she* could not take another woman’s leavings. We are triumphant—do you understand? A word to Sir Hilary would be our salvation—we should do what we please afterwards.’

‘But I shall not say it,’ cried Uncle Vincent, resolutely marching from the room.

Mrs. Vincent sat with head bent and brow knitted, motionless. Her husband would not do this thing; she knew further entreaties to be useless. Consequently the task devolved upon her, and she was equal to it. She had no pity for the young creature whose life she intended to blight; she was troubled by no hesitation, no remorse; now or never the deed must be done, and no one could do it better than herself. Until Dick was disinherited she should know no peace, and a scandal coupled with disgrace and dishonour was the surest way to obtain the desired result. Against these things Mrs. Carrol’s love and indulgence could not hold out; in the face of damning facts her keen rectitude would prevail, while Luce herself, from common motives of maidenly reserve, must needs withdraw from the contest. Mrs. Vincent rejoiced that the result was left in her hands; she could not quite trust her husband, but she could trust herself and be perfectly sure of not making a bungle. All day she revolved plans in her own mind, weighing the for and against in every aspect, modifying, selecting, or rejecting each suggestion as it presented itself. Presently she went up to Granny’s room, addressed her in the kindest manner imaginable, and put innumerable inquiries to her about her health. She volunteered to read aloud, and made no objection to the book proffered, plodding on and on patiently in the clearest and most unflinching of voices through the leading articles of the *Times*, and some chapters of Darwin’s ‘*Origin of Species*,’ which in less happy moods she was wont to designate as ridiculous rubbish for women to employ their minds upon. Mrs. Carrol listened contentedly—while the girls sat and stared at their mother—and thought to herself that she had really done her daughter-in-law injustice. She was remarkably kind and obliging if one only understood how to take her.

Mrs. Vincent, during these hours of extreme amiability, was maturing her plans, and getting Mrs. Carrol more and more into her power. She never intended her to get beyond it now, never again to exercise the right of free-will or indulge in the pretty feminine weaknesses and kind actions which her daughter-in-law considered unnecessary.

‘Wasting good money,’ she would think to herself, angrily remembering all the extravagances Dick had been allowed. Mrs. Vincent considered herself an admirable woman. She had been complimented so often by her friends, and her superiority niggardly acknowledged even by her husband, that she had grown to believe herself immaculate in her armour of duty and virtue. To expose a wicked frivolous coquette, to prevent a fine ancestral place, a large property with its vast responsibilities, from falling into the hands of a gambler and a *roué*, were, she thought, truly good and estimable actions; and if the means she was forced to employ were not quite so straightforward and honourable as she might have wished, still that did not alter the fact that her conduct remained admirable and well meaning. Certainly no time must be lost; they were within a day or two of the polling, and, that once concluded, the effect of her unmasked batteries would be entirely lost. Mrs. Vincent cogitated deeply. Should she herself call upon Sir Hilary? No, that would not do. He might refuse to listen to her, and he might suspect her of evil intentions. Should she send some one to him? No, it was dangerous to trust anybody. Should she write—if so, in her own name? Then the cowardly weapon of anonymity presented itself temptingly: she would be safe, he would suspect nothing, he would be entirely in the dark, but he would read—the blow would fall surely and certainly, and then, perhaps—who could tell?—he might come to her, and she could help him with her wisdom. That same evening Sir Hilary received an anonymous letter, informing him of his wife’s infidelity, mentioning the interview in the fir plantation, and begging him to challenge the truth of the assertion by inquiry. The letter concluded by assuring him that the writer was solely actuated by friendly motives, and induced to come forward from disgust at Lady Fenchurch’s trickery, which had excited indignation in the breast of honest persons.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LADY ELEANOR IS CAPTIOUS.

LADY ELEANOR sat in the gorgeous library, with its fine painted ceiling, to which the carved oak panelling nearly reached. She occupied the very crimson plush divan under the large tree-palm, where Maud had posed in elegant languor on the evening of Dick’s arrival. But there was no one to admire her now; she was alone in the house with the two girls, Luce and

Maud. Mr. Highview was away assisting at the election. Luce's heart was heavy and anxious, and the solitude of the great house seemed unbearable to Lady Eleanor, who loved brightness and gaiety around her, and therefore prevailed on Maud not to leave her at this moment. Maud was not disinclined to stay; true she could conduct no matrimonial schemes under the circumstances, but she enjoyed plenty of ease and comfort, and was spared her mother's reproaches and the presence of a spoilt brother, whose holiday time she abhorred and now fortunately escaped. A large bedroom was allotted her, looking out on the park, and here she spent much of her time. In another person's house, she threw her usual ideas of economy to the winds, burnt large fires in the grate from morning till night, lit as many candles as she chose, drank tea before she rose in the morning, and as she lay in the huge four-post bedstead, draped with a highly coloured pattern of *crétonne*, meditated on the joys of being rich. Surely no one can ever appreciate riches like the poor, especially the genteel poor, whose whole life has been a struggle to keep up appearances, and whose heart has been eaten out of them by the shifts and efforts they have endured. Maud considered material luxury her highest ideal, and even the temporary enjoyment of it soothed and enchanted her. She was a little sybarite, no couch was too soft, no cushion too luxurious, no existence too idle and easy. She put forth all her efforts to charm and ensnare, but only with the after-thought that once the goal reached she need never again exert herself. Thus, though her stay at Highview Castle was time wasted, yet, as it was time pleasantly wasted, she never grudged it. Lady Eleanor had not before found so congenial a companion, and the girl's visit seemed likely to be indefinitely prolonged. Her tastes and those of Lady Eleanor exactly coincided. Both loved grandeur and show, both estimated people more by their external than by their mental qualities; both were naturally selfish and cold, both preferred luxury to affection; but Maud, being young and dependent, cleverly hid her selfishness under a mask of obligingness, and her coldness under a show of devotion, thus duping Lady Eleanor till the latter conceived Maud to be nice and warm-hearted in an inverse ratio to Luce. Lady Eleanor never could forgive Luce for having taken the place of her own child; she could not forgive her for being plain (though her jealousy might have been roused had she possessed beauty), and she could not forgive her real love for and her fidelity to the losing cause personified by Dick.

'One owes something to one's family,' she would say sternly, while Luce, pale and silent, did watercolour sketches at a table near. 'A man who has once disgraced himself, and is shown to be deficient in the instincts of a gentleman, should never be tolerated in good society. When will you learn that "noblesse oblige," Luce?'

'Oh, aunt! I am nothing only a poor little orphan girl that you took in out of charity. Why should I be proud?'

'You come of an unblemished family,' said her aunt; 'your mother was a Highview;' and Lady Eleanor stretched out her hand, that elegant white hand, covered with rubies and diamonds, to stroke Squib, who lay curled beside her on a blue velvet cushion.

'I wonder how the election will pass off,' said Maud, with a yawn, laying down the last new novel she had been idly fingering. 'Mr. Highview will not be back to-night, will he, Lady Eleanor?'

'No, my dear, and I shall be heartily glad when the whole thing is over. If I had known all the trouble it would entail, I would never have mixed myself up in the election—it is not worth the pains one takes. After all, I always go in to dinner before any of these county people, and being in Parliament gives nobody much influence nowadays. Before the ballot it was different. I doubt if the butcher even would be flattered by a duchess's kiss in these degenerate days.'

'But, Lady Eleanor, you do not like to fail.'

'No, I do not,' candidly confessed Lady Eleanor ('pray don't stoop so, Luce, it is very unladylike'), and that is one reason why this young man's unpardonable folly makes me doubly angry.'

'Did you ever hear of any reason for Mr. Carroll's supposed conduct?' asked Maud presently.

'None, except that he gambled and kept racehorses; but that is sufficient reason, surely.'

'Perhaps Lady Fenchurch likes racing?'

'How, Lady Fenchurch!' Lady Eleanor half rose and looked angry. 'My dear Maud, I think you are speaking of what you know nothing about.'

'I beg your pardon; I thought it was no secret.' Maud began to pinch Squib's ears. The little dog resented the treatment, and turned round with an angry squeak.

'Pray leave Squib alone,' said Lady Eleanor. 'Here, you darling, come to me,' she added coaxingly to the dog. Squib crawled slowly up the front of her ruby velvet gown, and con-

descended to settle himself on her lap in the most comfortable place he could find. 'Really, Maud, you must not worry dogs or repeat gossip.'

'I won't,' said Maud, looking round to see whether Luce heard. The latter was bending over her drawing, some of her hair had fallen forward and obscured her face; she did not speak. Maud could not be quite certain.

'Or, at least,' continued Lady Eleanor, with assumed indifference, 'if you do repeat gossip you should take care to be correct. May I ask to what you refer?'

'Nothing, Lady Eleanor, nothing, I assure you; as you say, one must never gossip.'

'Of course any information you may think it necessary to give me does not come under the category of gossip, nor are questions you may ask which are useful for your enlightenment; therefore, speak on, child, without fear.'

'I have nothing to say;' Maud took a hothouse rose from the china bowl near, and began to pick at the leaves, pulling them off one by one, and dropping them on the Turkey carpet. 'I only wondered—one can't help wondering, you know—why Lady Fenchurch told Mr. Carrol about her necklace; or why, having told him, and thereby thrown suspicion on him, she did not keep the information to herself. Do you think she can care for him still?'

'She is married,' briefly answered Lady Eleanor.

'This is not always a reason. I wonder what *did* pass between them. I am sure he was fond of her once,' said Maud thoughtfully.

Luce made an uneasy movement like that of a person who suffers, but did not uncloset her lips. Maud, who loved watching her as a cat does a mouse (she had not yet quite forgiven her for stealing away her cousin), continued in her clear innocent tones:

'You don't mind my saying these things do you, dear Luce? It is so much better that one should have a right conception of the truth. I always thought you a little in a hurry to accept Dick. He is a dear fellow, but I should not have said his *forte* was fidelity. I think he runs after every pretty face, and he had scarcely time to love you *very* much, unless you believe in love at first sight. What is your opinion, Lady Eleanor?'

Every word stabbed Luce as Maud intended, stabbed even deeper than she knew, for Luce never forgot how Dick asked her to be his wife, nor that he told her loyally and truthfully of his previous attachment. She believed fully in his innocence; she could bear anything except to think that he had betrayed

her, and gone back in heart to that other woman who had already spoilt his life.

'Don't you think these surmises waste of time?' she said quietly; 'as I am engaged to Dick, his past can have nothing to do with me. I am only mistress of his future.'

'You are more forgiving than I am. I think his past has a great deal to do with you.'

Luce was silent. These innuendos were of daily occurrence.

'Oh!' said Lady Eleanor lightly, 'Luce does not care what we think, she is very obstinate; but you may be sure of this, Luce, unless Mr. Carrol clears himself fully and completely from all these accusations, you shall never marry him.'

'He must get into Parliament, too,' said Maud, in a light mocking tone, 'that will keep him steady. I am sure those long-winded debates and the late hours are enough to take the spirit out of any man.'

'If Mr. Highview had stood himself, we should have been saved all anxiety,' sighed Lady Eleanor.

'Yes, indeed,' echoed Maud; 'it is most unfortunate.'

Luce began to put up her drawing-things—she was sick and weary at heart. This love had cost her much already, and she was not yet near the end. Was she justified in clinging to him in spite of everything? Supposing he were only fooling her, only making use of her affection as a cloak to veil his real feelings for Lady Fenchurch. But in that case why had he been honest? why did he tell her that all was past and over between him and Evelyn, and that he meant to lead a new life? No, no, she could not misjudge him thus. It was the woman's part to keep hope bright and pure, to cultivate patience and forbearance, to love as she would be loved. Luce tried to calm her eager pulses, to still her anxious fears, to be strong with the strength of endurance and self-control. The weather, indeed, rather hindered cheerfulness. Luce, exquisitely sensitive to the changes of the atmosphere, suffered from the mild relaxing air and the damp and dreariness that pervaded all things. The soaked laurels shone green and glossy, the sheep shivered in the wet grass and came out on to the road to find a dry spot on the gravel to lie down, the drenched birds flew low under the bushes, the little crocus-heads withered and mildewed as they reached the surface. Only the snails crawled about on the path, in sticky impassive enjoyment. The muggy touch of spring had come bereft of its brightness, the sun scarcely ever shone, and the skies remained grey and leaden. If the clouds cleared off for a little while and the rain ceased, Luce would

mount her horse and gallop along the muddy lanes, snatching a brief excitement; the healthful exercise flushed her pale cheeks and gave a lustre to her eye, but at other times she crept quietly about the house like a timid mouse, as her uncle said, pinching her cheek kindly. When the election was decided, then her fate would be decided too, she reflected.

The last public meeting had been a stormy one. Dick's supporters had scarcely been able to obtain a hearing; no one could tell the result, though every one hoped according to his convictions. And then if Dick failed—Luce's breath forsook her at the thought—if violent opposition set in against her marriage, she must either mortally offend her uncle and aunt, who had trained and sheltered her from babyhood, or leave Dick disappointed and lonely to mourn her loss. She lay awake at night thinking of these things. She had nothing to comfort her, not a line, not a message from Dick; she was not allowed to see him, and, indeed, now she had promised him fidelity she did not care any more to defy her aunt's prohibitions. She was utterly and entirely lonely, far more lonely than Dick, who had the excitement of effort. Her uncle might share her feelings and sympathize with her, but she knew he would never oppose her aunt in any great thing. Thus she had only herself to depend upon, and that shadowy Father in heaven whose presence she dimly felt surrounding her. A hush of expectation was upon her, a gathering-up of every nerve and muscle in preparation for the coming struggle. She could scarcely remain still; she wandered aimlessly about, neglecting her books, hating the splendour of her empty life, and the long dinners, with all the pomp of plate, and noiseless plush-breeched footmen, in which her aunt delighted. Had the master of the house himself lain at death's door, the dinner would have been as perfectly served; the well-oiled wheels of routine have preserved their onward course without a creak. Maud could lie in her big bed and count the bunches of red roses on the *crêtonne* curtains with indolent happiness, and think of the blessings of riches, and feel one true thrill of gratitude for what she was temporarily permitted to enjoy; but Luce only chafed and fretted. She thought of dear Granny and her patient old face, and the life fast drawing to its close, which had been all effort and disappointment, and of the old servant, with his years of grey-haired service, and the reward of dismissal which would be his when Mrs. Vincent came into her kingdom; she thought of Uncle Vincent and his coarse jolly heartiness and ill-disguised envy of his nephew. She thought of the

smooth lawns, and the well-trimmed yew-hedges, and the quiet lake, and all the venerable lovely stateliness of the old place, which had seen generations of owners live, die, and disappear ; and still the smile of everlasting summer sunshine lit up the woods, and intensified the deep vivid colours of the flowers in the garden, and speckled the green grass alleys, always cool and fresh. The hurry and turmoil of life seemed to her even more foolish and mean when compared with the quiet and the majesty of the fine old house and grounds. Ah ! if only Dick could purge himself of the stain of tarnished honour thrown upon him, could succeed his grandmother in due course, and take up the string of her duties and responsibilities, as one who well understood them ; and if Luce—the child buried her face ; she dared not pursue her reverie further. She yearned so for the peaceful joys of home, for a deep and true affection, for the ample scope of all her faculties. She knew herself to be plain and simple and ordinary, not fitted for a unique and brilliant position, not born to stand on giddy heights, and shine and dazzle admiring crowds, but just to do her duty quietly, unobtrusively, and earnestly. Ah ! if Heaven would but be good to her, would but hear her prayers ! Then Luce, roused to a sense of the present, heard her aunt's voice calling, and descended, soon to be apparently absorbed in winding silk, or giving Squib his tea out of a dainty pink china saucer. Lady Eleanor yawned a good deal.

‘Once this election business over, I shall go abroad,’ she said to Maud ; ‘how anyone can ever endure to spend the spring in England I can't think—with the east winds to dry one's skin and cut one's face, and the dust flying all day : at least in Italy one can sit in an orange-grove, in a still warm atmosphere, and hold up a white cotton parasol to keep off the sun.’

‘And if you go, you will take me with you,’ insinuated Maud. ‘Do—I shall be so useful, and I'm never sea-sick.’

Lady Eleanor smiled, and, utilizing her adaptability, sent her upstairs to fetch a smelling-bottle.

CHAPTER XXXIV

MISS FENCHURCH LECTURES.

SIR HILARY having determined to crush Dick, and to punish his wife for the interest she had shown Dick by forcing her to take a share in his vengeance, felt considerably relieved, and pro-

ceeded to cool down in exact proportion to the heat of his previous rage. He was a kind-hearted man, though narrow ; he loved his wife in the cold selfish way many people have, seeing her faults, lenient to none of her weaknesses, and yet proud of her in a possessive fashion, because she was his property. He did not for an instant believe her to be more guilty than she confessed ; his wife, it seemed to him, would not thus forget herself, and yet he treated her with greater harshness and brutality than a more loving man, agonized by fear and jealousy, would have dared to employ. He was too obtuse to see that such conduct was driving her from him, and likely to precipitate the very results he feared. He had no suspicion of sentiment, and would have laughed at the modern talk about sympathy. He felt that as his wife she was entitled to food and clothes and every luxury, but by that very act of purchase was also his without hindrance or demur. It was her business to look pretty and charming, and do him credit, because she was his wife ; but it was also her duty to obey implicitly, and to think no one in the world worthy to be compared to him. After the first ebullition of anger, he intended things to resume their normal aspect ; he believed he had thoroughly frightened her, and never reckoned on the consequences of that fright. In his experience he had found women docile, gentle, and easily alarmed, and he scarcely anticipated the spirit of rebellion and resistance lying dormant in Evelyn. Kindness and confidence might have won her regard ; suspicion and anger must certainly repel her. When, therefore, his wrath had subsided, and he began to speak in a natural tone to Evelyn, he was astonished that she, remembering his bitterness, and feeling secure in the protection Dick had promised, answered him coldly and indifferently. It was on the very evening of the interview in the plantation ; her ears were still ringing with the sound of Dick's voice, and her heart was still beating with emotion and dangerous excitement. Her husband's common-place remarks stirred no responsive chord ; he simply wearied her a little and disturbed her reverie. Miss Fenchurch, always at her knitting, glanced anxiously from one to the other. A faint sense of anger troubled her as she remarked Evelyn's indifference, her cold disconnected replies, and her evident disregard of the condescension Sir Hilary showed in forgetting the cause of his resentment. She would have liked to pinch her sister-in-law into some demonstrativeness, to warm her chilly tones, and put humility and gratitude into their distant dignity. After a while Sir Hilary subsided

into the perusal of his paper, and Evelyn took up a novel. She was unstrung, she felt a distaste even for her piano, which usually proved a welcome resource in moments of vexation or ennui. Miss Fenchurch, whose whole life had been passed in the quiet routine of provincial existence—rarely, indeed, had she stirred from home, and, when she did, she had been oppressed with a nervousness which rendered the return to her own fireside extremely welcome—failed to understand the unrest, the nervous impatience, the need of excitement, which pervade the minds of modern women. She looked and looked again at Evelyn, and noticed that the drawing-room was warm and comfortable, that the piano stood conveniently near, that on a table were vases of hothouse flowers, and books and papers, and everything a young woman could want, and she wondered still more at Evelyn's strange obstinacy and recklessness. To agree with one's husband was not only a duty but a positive pleasure; jars and wrangles disturbed the equanimity of the conjugal atmosphere, and provoked ill-will and loss of appetite. Her brother looked unwell; Evelyn's lips were pale, and her eyes shone with an unnatural febrile light. The state of things was very unwise and very foolish. Miss Fenchurch determined to speak to her sister-in-law at once. Notwithstanding her aversion to meddling, she must say a warning word to a girl she had herself brought up, drilled in manners and deportment, and taught the Catechism and use of the globes. It must have been with something of the homely sparrow's feelings when it gazes upon the cuckoo it has hatched, that Miss Fenchurch observed the daring and insubordination of her brother's wife, noticed her flashing eyes when remonstrated with, her independence and self-assertion. It was unseemly, it was unladylike, but with a sigh she said to herself it was natural. With the flavour of board schools all around, and the rash wild boasts of scepticism filling the air, it was not to be wondered at, though intensely to be deplored.

When Evelyn wished her good-night and was about to imprint the careless kiss that regularly fell on the old maid's cheek, Miss Fenchurch seized her sister-in-law's hands with a studied kindness, and drew her into the maidenly bedroom set out so primly with its old-fashioned mahogany furniture, its dimity coverings, and the little pile of good books placed on a corner of the table. 'Come in, dear,' she said, 'for a minute and talk to me.'

'You won't keep me long, Rachel,' answered Evelyn with a yawn, putting down her candlestick, in anticipation of a rambling

discourse on the best recipe for plum jam, or removing fruit-stains from linen, or on the qualities and peccadilloes of the village children, 'please, I'm very tired.'

Evelyn's pretty flexible figure in the close-fitting white cashmere dress, with the coils of raven-black hair, piled in gloomy masses round her well-shaped head, might have furnished a sculptor with a model, and raised the envy of many a London belle, but Miss Fenchurch had no eye for beauty in the strict sense of the term; curves, outlines, and sinewy forms did not appeal to unexisting artistic sensibilities. She admired orthodox pictures, and hid her face coyly before undraped Greek statues, but Sir Joshua Reynolds was the extreme limit of her critical approbation, and even his ladies, though fine and well bred, were, she considered, a little deficient in propriety, their draperies seemed so very free and unconventional; and if by chance a pin had given way—Miss Fenchurch shuddered at the possible consequences.

Naturally, then, she saw only in Evelyn a healthy well-grown young woman, whose will required control, and whose temper especially required to be curbed and brought under discipline.

'What is it, Rachel?' said Lady Fenchurch with another yawn, settling herself more easily and gracefully when her sister-in-law paused; 'do make haste, I am dying to go to bed.'

'You are remarkably tired to-night, I think,' said Miss Fenchurch, pursing her lips; 'generally you are ready enough to sit up, playing airs from those silly comic operas.'

'Well, one changes. I suppose it isn't a crime to be sleepy?'

'No, but it's a grave fault in a woman to snub her husband.'

'Indeed! Well, my husband snubs me. Is that a fault in your eyes?'

Miss Fenchurch coughed. The matter was more delicate than she had supposed. Evelyn spoke in a cold sarcastic tone; it might be difficult to touch her.

'You did not respond quite nicely to my brother's kindness to-night,' she said at last.

'Didn't I? Well, you see, I never know if I'm a sinner or a saint; yesterday he stormed at me, to-day it is all sweet and sugary. I can't accommodate myself to this rapid change of tactics.'

'Tactics between a husband and wife! There ought to be humility and gentleness on your part, and I am sure in that case I can promise that my brother will be grateful and kind.'

'I don't think he has treated me at all fairly, and I certainly

don't intend to be whistled back to his side like a retriever whenever he chooses. I have my pride, my dignity. It is not because Hilary was my guardian that I am necessarily his slave.'

'Oh, my dear !' Miss Fenchurch gave a shudder of remonstrance.

'I mean what I say. I have no idea of being trodden down and illtreated by my husband or by anybody.' Evelyn tapped her little slippered foot angrily against the floor.

'That kind of insubordination and rebellion in a woman is a terrible mistake, believe me,' said Miss Fenchurch sadly.

'What does all your submission lead to ? Look at you, you dare not order a dish for dinner unless it is to your brother's particular taste ; you never get a junket, or a real little bit of diversion, but just sit here from year's end to year's end, seeing your brother's friends, receiving their frumpy old wives, reading books you are told are *proper*, instead of pleasing yourself at your age ; paying weekly bills without cessation, grumbling over a pennyworth of bread or a farthing's worth of tallow-candles. Do you call that a life ? I don't,' Evelyn answered.

'Evelyn, your sentiments terrify me—so well brought up as you were too !'

'Of course, you taught me to read, and I have read to some purpose ; you gave me a mirror, and I have learnt to dress and look well ; you taught me the duties of marriage, and I have ascertained it has rights also.'

'Are you speaking of the Married Woman's Property Act ?' gasped Miss Fenchurch, aghast with stupefaction ; 'that does not apply to you.'

'I know that,' said Evelyn with concentrated bitterness, 'because I have not a penny. I wish I had ; *how* I wish I had !'

'Oh, child, go to your room, and say your prayers ; you're very, very wicked, flying in the face of Providence and all His mercies.'

'I told you I was sleepy, why did you rouse me ?' Evelyn said with a subtle smile. Now that she was secure of Dick's devotion she rather enjoyed a war of wits with her sister-in-law, in which she knew she must have the advantage. She did not intend to make any real use of her lover, she did not even realize that she was foolishly risking her position, but she did appreciate the sense of power which his strong support afforded her. She was worldly enough to determine to keep her luxuries at any cost, but woman enough to play with edged tools, and

like the danger, while she tried to solve the impossible problem of eating her cake and having it. Miss Fenchurch had never before in her experience met with a similar case, and was puzzled how to treat it. She determined to try persuasion. 'Consider, my dear,' she began, 'it is to your own interest to be amiable.'

'I dare say, but I am not a hypocrite, and just now I don't feel inclined to be amiable.'

'Religion teaches us that we are miserable sinners.'

'Your religion perhaps. I am sure I am not a bit worse than my neighbours. I have never worried for a London house, though of course I should like it, nor been at all extravagant, or done any of the things that many wives do to annoy their husbands.'

'Because you are not worse than others, that does not make you better. You can have very little real right feeling if you pride yourself on not being as bad as some women.'

'Is the homily over?' asked Evelyn coldly; 'we have not yet entered upon Lent, and I'm horribly sleepy.'

'Oh yes, go, go to bed and dream of forbidden pleasures; you are a wicked girl; I am sadly grieved and sadly disappointed in you,' cried Miss Fenchurch angrily.

Evelyn shrugged her shoulders. Her sister-in-law's lectures fell upon her ears like the sound of idle rushing waters; she thought the whole thing much ado about nothing. It was certainly very disagreeable when people were so dreadfully old-fashioned and prudish. It robbed life of all amusement and distraction. She took up her candlestick and moved forward to kiss her sister-in-law, but Miss Fenchurch jerked pettishly backwards and presented only an angular arm instead of a cheek for the salute. Evelyn shrugged her shoulders again, and without further comment departed. Miss Fenchurch remained standing by the table, feeling cross and confused. Vaguely she began to realize that her brother's marriage had been a mistake; that the difference in years created also a difference in feeling almost insurmountable; that, unless some great effort were made, things must end badly; and that for once in his life, perhaps, her brother had not been so wise as he should. Miss Fenchurch proceeded to undress herself, slowly pondering on these things; slowly she unpinned her cap heavy with jingling bugles, slowly she wound up her thin front hair into the prim curl papers, and hid her gaunt form in the folds of her flannel dressing-gown. She could scarcely remember the time when she had been young and giddy; young she must

have been (allusions to her age even now displeased her), but giddy—never. She had kept young men at a proper distance and preserved a maidenly decorum, which perhaps had driven them away. Miss Fenchurch recalled no proposal but one, that of a penniless young officer, who had been harshly reprovèd by her parents for daring rashly to offer himself. He was a handsome young fellow, and for one brief instant Miss Fenchurch thought she might have been happy with him, then sighing she resigned herself submissively to her parents' veto. Since then she had given no man the right to suppose she cast one thought towards him. Naturally the restless excitable modern temperament proved a puzzle and an annoyance to her. That girls should have a will of their own astonished her; that they should seek to impose that will upon their husbands terrified and bewildered her.

CHAPTER XXXV

MR. DEWSNAP ADVISES.

SIR HILARY was on the point of starting to hunt. He was whistling loudly to himself as he pulled on his boots and tied the pipeclayed strings into the neatest of little bows. He was rather a dandy in the hunting-field; and, though an elderly man, rode good horses, and showed well to the front in a run. Perhaps the only thing in the world he really loved was sport; and, on hunting occasions, his good humour was invariably unruffled. Even long dragging days, when the scent was bad, and the pace slow, and the weather cold and drizzling—days which sent others, less keen, home disgusted, never wearied him. He declared that it rejoiced his heart to watch the hounds hunt, and that a quick thing as a rule was no better than a steeplechase.

Now, therefore, when preparing to make an early start, he was the essence of good humour, and whistled 'For a hunting we will go' unconcernedly, without regard to time and tune. While thus engaged the post-bag was handed to him, whence he extracted Mrs. Vincent's anonymous letter. He read it twice over before he seemed to understand its purport, then he dropped the boot-hook, he still held, heavily on the floor, spread the letter out flat before him on the table, and exclaimed loudly, 'Deuce take it!'

The ingeniously worded letter left behind it a terribly bitter sting, and the annoyance, coming as it did just when he was in the happiest temper imaginable, seemed doubly crushing.

His wife the talk of the county ; *his* wife holding clandestine meetings with her lover ; *his* wife deceiving him like the vulgar spouse of a shopkeeper.

Then the story of the necklace rose to his mind and assumed an utterly disproportionate importance. There was no doubt left him that the necklace had been taken by Dick, not *stolen*, for Sir Hilary's wife had given it him. To prosecute Dick was to implicate Evelyn ; to punish him was to ruin her. Sir Hilary ground his teeth in impotent rage. The sweet smiling hypocrite ! The cunning wretch ! How she had fooled him with kind words. He should never, never pardon her, of course, but he would allow no scandal, would give nobody the right to jeer and scoff at him. He would be convinced of the truth first ; the letter might be a lie ; he would confront his wife with it. In her face he could easily read the truth or falsehood of the accusation. Hastily pulling on his boot, he hurried in his smart pink clothes, the emblem of his quest of careless pleasure, to his wife's room. She had risen late and was not yet dressed. Her glossy hair hung in beautiful waves down her back, and streamed over the pale yellow dressing-gown she wore. As he entered she turned towards him with a smile. She had slept well and forgotten her peevishness of the previous night. Whatever else might happen she hated to be dull or bored ; life was very pleasant to her, and she had endeavoured to extract as much joy from it as was possible, consistent with ease and indolence. She had never looked prettier, her rosy lips were parted with a smile, her eyes bright with repose, the negligence of her toilet enhanced her charms. Even Sir Hilary in the midst of his anger felt this ; he stopped for an instant on the threshold looking at the lovely picture. The neat French maid who was brushing her mistress's hair, paused with the brush in her hand.

'What is it, Hilary ?' said Evelyn, carelessly gathering up her rings as she spoke.

'I——Marie, you can leave us alone.'

Both mistress and maid looked surprised.

'Certainly, sir,' said the maid, laying down the brush with an air of disdain, and slowly quitting the room.

Evelyn turned round a little and faced her husband as he strode forward ; his face working with stern passion alarmed her. He came close up to her, put his hand on her bare arm, dazzlingly white under the loose yellow sleeve, and said in a tone that he endeavoured to make sternly judicial, but which was really only bitterly cold and hard :

‘Have you met Carrol since the affair of the necklace? And were you with him in the fir plantation the day before yesterday?’

Evelyn, now thoroughly frightened, stammered and blushed. There was an instant’s silence, then he dropped her hand with a jerk.

‘Don’t speak,’ he said, ‘don’t tell me ; I know it is true.’

He fell back a pace or two, and turned so deadly white that Evelyn, fearing some mishap, sprang to his assistance.

‘No, no, leave me ; it is nothing,’ he said, waving her aside. Then steadying himself with some difficulty, he walked from the room, leaving Evelyn speechless with astonishment and surprise. It was some moments before she recovered her composure sufficiently to understand that he had left her under a false impression, and that, in the state of rage he was in, dire might be the consequences unless she could appease him. When she thought of these things and tried to look them boldly in the face she at once started, as she was, in her loose robe, with her hair flying, to search for him. But he was not in his dressing-room, and she dared not face the servants down stairs. She therefore determined to return to her own apartment, and ring for her maid, whom she despatched at once in haste with the strictest orders not to return without St. Hilary, whom she desired to speak with at once. The time seemed interminable before the maid returned from her fruitless errand, announcing that Sir Hilary had already mounted his horse and gone out. Mounted his horse !—surely in the state he was in, he would never have contemplated hunting ; yet, if not, why had he ridden off so suddenly in his scarlet coat and topboots? Evelyn could only suppose that she had exaggerated the danger, and that he was not really so angry as she had believed. She sat quietly thinking and wondering how long this unpleasant state of things would last, while Marie finished arranging her hair. Presently the maid hazarded a remark, ‘Monsieur seems strange this morning.’

‘Why?’ calmly replied Evelyn.

‘He never send me out of the room other days, and he looked cross, oh, very cross.’

‘He is worried with the election.’

‘Perhaps ; but, if Madame will pardon me, I think she should take care for Monsieur, he is ill, he not look himself, his eyes are wild and strange ; Madame pardons me?’

‘Sir Hilary looks strange, you say?’ repeated Evelyn slowly.

‘Very strange, my lady, just so my poor brother-in-law looked

before he tried to murder his wife, and we had to shut him up in the "asile des fous."

'Murder! What do you mean? Why do you speak of such dreadful things?'

'I did not wish to alarm my lady,' said the subtle Marie, deftly twisting up her mistress's long hair, 'but sometimes one must humour gentlemen when they look strange.'

'Yes, yes,' impatiently replied Evelyn, wondering what the maid knew, and whether there really was any likelihood of the danger at which she hinted. Slight mental aberration, restlessness, excitability—certainly here was a satisfactory reason for all that had alarmed her. Judicious treatment, careful diet, would no doubt soon restore the mental equilibrium so strangely shaken. Meanwhile she must try not to alarm herself.

On leaving Oakdene Sir Hilary galloped quickly along the road to West Thorpe. He met one or two sportsmen proceeding to the meet, who nodded and waved their hands to him, and seemed much surprised at his hasty progress, although attired in pink, in the opposite direction, but he pursued his way without regard to their wondering looks until he pulled up at the lawyer's house. The little garden on each side of the paved walk was bright with spring flowers, and the page came out to meet him, rosy from his mid-day lunch, but disappointed to observe a tall black horse instead of his friend the yellow cob.

Sir Hilary pushed past him, scarcely waiting to hear that the lawyer was at home, and the page eyed the horse meditatively, doubting whether it would do to tickle him under the stomach, or whether in the event of his resenting these familiarities, unpleasant consequences might not ensue. 'Come along, my beauty,' he said, seizing the bridle after due reflection, 'come along, and let's make friends.'

Sir Hilary was promptly admitted into the room where the lawyer sat writing, with the calm indifference of a man who lives on the consequences of others' wrongdoing, but who takes very good care not to indulge in any follies on his own account.

He greeted Sir Hilary as quietly and cordially as though there were nothing remarkable in calling to consult one's lawyer dressed in the most perfect of hunting habiliments, at an hour when every good sportsman was hurrying to the covert side.

'Anything new about the election?' he asked, motioning Sir Hilary to a seat.

'Nothing. I——'

‘I’m told we’re safe to have a majority.’

‘Dewsnap, I’ve bad news!’ Sir Hilary’s throat felt parched, he could scarcely speak.

‘Bad news, I’m sorry to hear it. Wait a moment; take a glass of wine after your hot ride. It’s a relaxing, muggy day.’ Dewsnap rose and pulled out his keys.

‘I don’t mind if I do take a drop of something. I’m absurdly shaky this morning.’

‘Ah, well! canvassing is hard work, and all that speechifying is exciting. You’re bitten with it, I expect.’

‘No—but I don’t wish that scoundrel to succeed—I tell you he shan’t, mind, if I can help it.’

‘That was a queer business about the necklace, wasn’t it? It puzzled me rather—the motive I mean,’ said the lawyer, carefully pouring out the wine. ‘Such a mad thing on the part of the young fellow, he was certain to be found out; however, when men are in want of money it is extraordinary what follies they will commit, and never think of the consequences. There’s some wild blood about those Carrols, I expect; look at Vincent Carrol now, for instance, with that red face of his and love of low company—you would scarcely take him for a gentleman. However, I suppose even *he* would draw the line at stealing.’

‘He mustn’t be prosecuted, Dewsnap.’

‘Why not? he richly deserves it. A man’s being of a good family makes crime worse, and, in my opinion, there is no reason for letting him off easily.’

‘My wife——’ Sir Hilary changed colour and gasped so strangely that the lawyer grew uneasy.

‘Your wife has interceded for him—that is very kind and pretty of her. I suppose she thinks you will give her another necklace directly, to compensate her; women don’t regard honour as men do. They think a lover’s infidelity worse than a bit of dishonesty.’

Sir Hilary gasped again, and at last forced out the words:

‘It will compromise my wife.’

‘Compromise your wife! stuff, my dear fellow! I never knew you so scrupulous before. To gloss the matter over would compromise your wife infinitely more. I can understand your reluctance to prosecute, but, after all, it is the firm who prosecute, and they naturally do it in their own interests, and as a duty to the public.’

‘He did not steal the necklace.’

‘Not steal it—pray who did then?’

‘My wife gave it to him.’

‘The deuce she did!’ The lawyer paused. This was an entirely new aspect of the case, and he did not see his way as clearly as he could wish to helping his old friend out of the dilemma. ‘She told you?’

‘No, but I found it out by an anonymous letter. First she met him clandestinely, then——’

‘You surely don’t believe anonymous letters?’

‘She confessed it, and says she told him about taking the necklace to the jewellers’, and, to my mind, it’s as clear as daylight.’

‘Ah, you think so then? What do you mean to do?’ asked Dewsnap, after a pause, turning over his papers to avoid looking at Sir Hilary.

‘Do? First of all change my will, and then hold my tongue; I won’t have a scandal; I won’t be made a laughing-stock, I—she was so handsome, Dewsnap, and I thought her true as steel.’

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders. Such mishaps were too common in his experience to cause him surprise or emotion, but he was anxious to spare his old friend pain and trouble, and sincerely desirous, as far as possible, to avoid publicity.

‘If you think this, you are right to stop proceedings. Of course Cherry and Appleton will conform to your wishes; the loss is yours, not theirs, there will be no difficulty, I imagine; but Lady Fenchurch?’

‘Don’t speak of her, don’t mention her name; she is a miserable creature.’

‘You must not say that, if you do not wish for a scandal.’

‘No, to be sure. Ah, Dewsnap, you were right, I was a fool to marry.’

‘A fool to take a young wife, yes, that’s true.’

‘I thought as she was so young, she would be yielding and amenable to reason.’

‘Precisely; men of your age always think that, and find out their mistake when it’s too late.’

‘Too late? do you think she hates me?’

‘Pooh, nonsense, she knows which side her bread is buttered. Besides, you are making a vast deal too much out of all this business. I suspect she has been more foolish and silly than anything else, taken by a young man’s good looks and a parcel of fine compliments.’

‘I am sure she had all she wanted. Why that necklace itself cost me a pretty penny.’

‘I must say she did not behave well. The mistake is, ever

to expect women to behave well, especially if you load them with presents ; there are some favours so great they can only be requited by colossal ingratitude ; however, in this case, I sincerely believe your wife has only been foolish. I should advise you to go home, give her a kiss, and say no more about it. Depend upon it by this time she is already heartily ashamed of herself.'

'I shall alter my will—put in a codicil. I left her residuary legatee, and far too large a jointure ; that must be all changed now.'

'Master Dick must be dealt with too, leave me to manage him, I'll put the screw on him, and, don't change your will.'

'Thank you, I am quite determined.'

'You don't seem satisfied ; have you anything more to tell me ?'

'I'm extremely obliged for your advice, but——'

'But you don't mean to take it. You needn't beat about the bush. I am quite accustomed to such inconsistencies.'

'With your knowledge of human nature, can *you* believe in your wife ?'

'Of course I can ; she is plain and a good mother, and in our class of life we don't want or expect quite so much amusement as in your fashionable society.'

'Fashionable indeed !' Sir Hilary groaned.

'I repeat again, go home and make it up. You're attached to your wife, and it is to her interest to keep well with you. Besides, there is Miss Fenchurch, surely she can play the dragon a bit on your behalf, and make your mind easy.'

'My sister, good soul, doesn't understand this kind of thing.'

'Well, she ought to know how to look after a young creature, drive with her, talk to her, engage her confidence.'

'Ah, my dear fellow, it was all a mistake ; we are both of us too old to cope with her fancies ; I see it now.'

'No mistake is irrevocable ; change your tactics, that's all.'

'I mean to send for your clerk at once, and have a codicil drawn up.'

'To be sure women are aggravating, but don't be in a hurry, wait a little,' urged the lawyer.

'I have waited already too long. The election will be over almost immediately, and what then ? I shall be either an M.P., or rejected ; that will not cure my wife of her infatuation.'

'Wait and see. If Dick beats you she will be annoyed, women always like to be first ; if you beat him, she will have enough to do thinking of your success. Besides, I believe you will win the contest.'

'I wish I was as sanguine as you are. Where is that clerk? he is a long time coming.'

'Well, if you are determined—I have nothing more to say.' Dewsnap rang the bell and gave some orders.

'At any rate you will agree with me that there is no possible advantage to be gained by crying over spilt milk,' said the lawyer.

'None whatever—but I'm so confoundedly upset—just to show you, I have missed a favourite meet—Ashton spinney, you know what that is? and galloped Fireking along that macadamised road here, as if he were a hack—without any regard for his legs, when he cost me 200 guineas.'

'Foolish, certainly.'

'My head feels all queer—I'm in a fever.'

'Very likely you are, you've worked yourself into one. Now go home; take my advice, go home; take a refreshing draught, and speak nicely and sensibly to your wife—a smile from her will cool you better than anything—and be seen driving together this afternoon—don't let the world begin to gossip. It's death to a young woman's reputation.'

'She has risked that pretty well herself already,' said Sir Hilary gloomily.

'Stuff! No one knows anything. Just keep your own counsel, and authorize me to call on Cherry and Appleton and stop proceedings at once. I'll go up there directly, if you like.'

'You are very kind. I'll leave myself in your hands, I am sure you will act wisely, but I doubt if things will turn out as simple and easy as you suppose.'

Sir Hilary could not be induced to alter his mind; the needful formalities were gone through, and the codicil having been drawn up, he rode home more soberly than he had come. Arrived at Oakdene, he went at once to the library to speak to his wife, according to the lawyer's advice.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE DOCTOR TELLS A WHITE LIE.

IT was with mixed feelings that Sir Hilary entered his wife's sitting-room, and it was with considerable annoyance that he found it empty. During his solitary ride home, at the conclusion of his interview with the lawyer, he had been preaching to himself patience and forbearance, he had been repeating inwardly

the arguments Dewsnap had used, that Lady Fenchurch was only foolish, that she had been misjudged, that it was not likely she meant any harm, and that if she did it was wiser to ignore the inevitable, and to patch up the rent caused in their married life. All this Sir Hilary said to himself, and enforced it by the most cogent arguments he could think of, and yet he seemed to feel a kind of savage satisfaction in remembering the alteration in his will and in picturing her discomfiture when she made the discovery. Sir Hilary had been a bachelor too long not to be deeply sensible of his rights and tenacious of his liberty; he could not reconcile himself to the idea that after conferring such benefits as his name and his fortune upon a penniless orphan, she should reward him by mockery and disdain. He had been accustomed to rule his household, his meek sister, and his obsequious servants, with a frown or a word, and he had no idea that anyone would defy him. His temper was hot and angry, and the apparent courtesy of his manner, purely an affair of education, reached no further than the exterior. That his wife was not in her *boudoir* was natural enough. She had written a few notes, practised her piano for an hour, and was now, taking advantage of the fine sunshiny weather, gone for a stroll before luncheon. The traces of her presence were everywhere around the room; the *Morning Post* all crumpled as she had thrown it down after reading the fashionable intelligence, the music littered over the piano, the blotting-book in disorder, note-paper strewn upon the table, here a pocket-handkerchief dropped in a hurry, there the pug's basket with the marks still visible of the warm pressure left by the little animal when he jumped out to follow his mistress.

Sir Hilary picked up the pocket-handkerchief and held it a moment before his face. How sweet it was, saturated with some delicious odour, an odour he recognised as a favourite of his wife's. What a pity he had lost faith in her, what a pity! He fidgeted backwards and forwards, sat in her chair, and moved the papers on the table; no signs of wrong-doing were there; his own photograph stood on one side of the silver ink-stand, Miss Fenchurch's on the other. Everything bespoke the happy luxury of a peaceful well-ordered home. He had been kind to her, he thought no one could deny that; the furniture of her boudoir was new and bright and tasteful, she had pleased her own fancy in the silks and laces, the upholsterer he sent for from London had executed her wishes, and sent him in consequence a heavy bill. Sir Hilary paid it without a murmur;

'And you will let Luce know,' said Dick anxiously; 'I think she will be pleased too.'

'Of course, but I suspect your Uncle Vincent has seen to that already. It will be a blow to him, I suppose. A pity he did not support you; it is so much pleasanter when a family is not divided.'

Saying this, good Mr. Highview departed in excellent spirits, secure as the bearer of pleasant news of an agreeable reception at the hands of Lady Eleanor.

Dick remained sitting by the fire; he smoked another cigar and drank a little brandy and water with Gubbins, who was too much elated to retire to bed, and entertained him for a couple of hours longer with stories of all the election dodges he had witnessed, and of the severe contests he had assisted at. 'But I never was more pleased at anyone's success than I am at yours,' he concluded, pouring himself out a stiff tumbler of brandy and water. Dick, when at last his convivial companion permitted it, threw himself perfectly exhausted on his bed and enjoyed short uneasy slumbers, in which he was perpetually addressing an angry mob that pelted him with garbage, and straining a hoarse voice from which not one audible note would proceed.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

GRANNY SLEEPS.

LUCE's stay at Long Leam during these events was no sinecure. Already, the first evening at dinner, Mrs. Vincent took the opportunity of talking at her, conveying pointed allusions across the table to the innocent Dolly and Eliza, who had been promoted from the schoolroom to the dignity of a late dinner. Mr. Vincent, who had been drinking all day at the various public-houses in the pursuit of his electioneering duties, was voluble and argumentative, and perpetually informed her, in a loud and defiant voice, that the first duty of every man and woman was to stick up for the laws of his Queen and his country.

'The Liberals,' he said, 'all lie. They are nothing but a demagogu—a cruel, grinding, and tyrannical lot. Every Radical is a tyrant; he deserves hanging. If I were the Queen I'd hang every one of 'em.'

'Hush, dear, hush!' said Mrs. Vincent, carefully dispensing

fish. 'Here is your favourite cod and egg-sauce, and you must be hungry.'

'So I am, as hungry as a hawk. Haven't I been all day shouting against those d—d Radicals, the scum of the people, which they're trying to foist upon us?'

'Well, dear, you might as well drop politics a little. Luce, you know, is shaking in her shoes.'

Luce hastened to explain that she hoped Mr. Vincent would treat her as one of the family, and that she did not wish to be a check on the conversation.

'I hope we know better, my dear,' said Mrs. Vincent, sarcastically, measuring out a small glass of sherry to be taken medicinally by Dolly, who, though a teetotaler, occasionally required a fillip, and was just now much distressed by a certain unseemly eruption on her face. We all know how much you care for that misguided young man, who is standing to-day as a Liberal, more's the pity. But what can you expect from a person who is a gambler?'

'Mrs. Vincent, indeed, I assure you——'

'Excuse me, my dear, Vincent knows from sad experience how terribly he used to bet, and then, when the money is due, of course it has to be paid somehow, and people can't afford to be scrupulous.'

Luce held her tongue. She did not wish to be drawn into any discussion which could only lead to angry expostulations, and serve no possible good purpose.

'Stick to the institutions of the country,' blurted out Uncle Vincent, in his drivelling tones. 'That's the duty of every man and woman. The Tory party is a godsend to the country; you and I, and all of us, owe everything to the Tories, here's their health—bless 'em.'

Uncle Vincent drank off a bumper of claret as he uttered these words, but a stern look from his wife caused him presently to subside into his plate of roast mutton.

'I do hope you will not agitate Granny,' said Mrs. Vincent, turning to Luce. 'It was a foolish business your coming here at all, to talk of distressing subjects, and remind her perpetually of the disgrace that has fallen upon her family. I do all I can to keep her quiet, but now you are come I expect my pains will be wasted.'

'Indeed, Mrs. Vincent, I do not believe I shall agitate her, and I think she finds it a comfort to have me by her side.'

'Humph! I am sure I have spared no trouble to please

her, and as for her broth and her gruel they have been first rate, never smoked or lumpy, I took care of that, and I know how difficult it is to have nice gruel, even in the best houses, where these things are left to the stillroom maid, and always done carelessly.'

'I am sure you have been very kind.'

'I tell you what it is, Maria,' said Vincent, 'it's my belief a good glass of port wine would do Granny more good than all your slops.'

'Now, Vincent, pray don't interfere; if there is anything I understand thoroughly it is nursing. Don't you remember when Tommy had the measles, and Dolly the scarlet-fever, and you yourself that nasty bilious attack, that puzzled the doctors so, how dear Sir Calomel Mortar remarked with a low bow—his bow is exquisite, really—that he had not a nurse to compare with me for attention and judgment?'

'Oh, I know you're a great hand at boluses, the children know it too' (he looked round for approval, Dolly and Eliza sniggered and nudged one another under the table, it was the kind of joke they understood); 'but I believe my mother wants nourishment more than physic.' That was Luce's opinion also, and before she returned to Granny's room she made friends with the butler, and persuaded him to give her a pint bottle of champagne and the wing of a chicken, armed with which delicacies she made her way to Granny's bedside. The dear old lady lay quite still among her pillows; she only rose from her bed now for a few hours every day, and each time the exertion seemed greater. Mrs. Vincent occasionally accused her of laziness, and dilated on the waste of time caused by lying in bed, but, as she noticed Granny's pale cheeks and feeble voice towards evening, she relaxed her urgency, and permitted the old lady to use her own discretion about her rest. On one thing however she was firm, and that was in the matter of diet; when people took no exercise she averred solid food must be partaken of sparingly; indeed, she attributed most illnesses to over-feeding and reckless indulgence in butcher's meat. Mrs. Vincent fed her servants and family now largely on fish; she had read books advocating fish as an article of diet, and, finding it cheap and convenient, instituted a Friday fast as rigid as that of any Romanist faithful to the precepts of his confessor. Granny was only allowed slops, and wine was positively forbidden her. Luce knew this, and knew that by bringing contraband food she risked Mrs. Vincent's awful displeasure. But firm in her sense of right she braved it.

When Granny saw the appetizing tray she smiled with pleasure and amusement.

'What's that for, dear?' she said, raising herself on her pillows; 'are you going to have supper?'

'No, but you are, dear Granny; now please eat just to satisfy me.'

Granny, a little alarmed at the prospect of Mrs. Vincent's return, at first demurred, but by dint of coaxing and entreaties Luce managed to prevail upon her to drink some wine and to eat a little of the chicken.

'I can't think why the doctor doesn't order you wine,' she said, sitting on the bed and cutting up the chicken daintily to save Granny trouble.

'The doctor, my dear? I don't have him now; Mrs. Vincent dismissed him some time ago; he only prescribed plain food and quiet, and I get that.'

'I call chicken plain food, and so I am sure does he. Oh, Granny, it makes my heart ache to see you so quiet and uncomplaining,' said Luce sadly.

'Well, dear, complaining would only make me worse; after all, an old woman of my age cannot expect much.'

'But you have enjoyed your little supper, haven't you now?' said Luce, carefully folding up the napkin and wiping away the crumbs that had fallen on the bedclothes, 'and you will sleep much better for it I'm sure.'

'I feel very well,' said Granny, rolling herself up cosily, 'and rather like a child that has had a surreptitious feast.'

'Your eyes are as bright again; to-morrow, dear Granny, we will have another feast.'

'Ah, yes, to-morrow, perhaps my dear boy will be an M.P. by that time.'

'Let us hope he will.' Luce kissed her and presently the old lady sank into a peaceful slumber. The next morning she seemed brighter than usual. Luce read the paper to her, and told her about all that went on in the house. How Uncle Vincent had ridden off very early in the morning and had informed them of Sir Hilary's illness, and how many bows of blue ribbon Mrs. Vincent and Dolly and Eliza had made up with their own hands to decorate themselves and their friends, and how Mrs. Vincent and the girls were going to drive in Granny's carriage to West Thorpe in the afternoon, to hear the result of the polling, and how Luce herself intended to stay at home all day and keep Granny company. The old lady was interested in everything, and pleased to hear the weather was

fine though cold, and that the slight frosts of the past week had not hurt the peach-trees ; and then Luce fetched her work, a piece of tapestry she was painting for the panel of Lady Eleanor's boudoir, and sat quietly down to a few hours' unobtrusive employment. As the day advanced Granny grew fidgety ; she could have as much chicken and champagne as she chose in Mrs. Vincent's absence, but she felt no appetite, and would take nothing but her beef-tea ; her hands had a visible nervous tremble in them which Luce had never before observed, and her voice, usually so low and sweet, to-day was tinged with querulousness. Luce felt a little anxious. She knew that this day of suspense would be a trial, and it was for that reason that she had wished to spend it with Granny, and to surround her with compensating kindness. Granny left her bed at luncheon-time, and Luce descended to the family meal while the old lady's toilet was performed by her faithful maid. Mrs. Vincent, dressed in a blue silk gown, was hurriedly eating her luncheon, talking and carving at the same moment.

'Make haste, Dolly, the carriage will be round directly, and you will not have finished. Have some cold meat, Eliza, you've eaten nothing ! Help yourself, Luce, we are all in a hurry.'

Luce took her place quietly. 'Never mind me, Mrs. Vincent, I shall do very well.'

'And how is Granny ? Keep her quiet, whatever you do. I don't suppose she really understands all that's going on, though—and a very good thing too—old people are generally supine.'

'I think Granny is only anxious, and greatly feels the split in the family.'

'Yes, of course, that her darling boy should turn out so badly must be disappointing. Now, wrap yourself up well, Dolly ; put on the jacket with chinchilla ; you know you had a cold last week.'

At last Mrs. Vincent and her party departed, and Luce, having meekly received the final injunctions and recommendations shouted to her from the carriage-window, slowly returned to Granny's room. Granny sat in her armchair by the fire, whence she could look out over the terraces and the smooth lawns and the water, to leafless woods beyond. 'Are they gone ?' said Granny feebly ; 'how long they were ! I thought the bustle would never be over.'

'Did they disturb you, Granny ? Well, we shall be quiet enough now for the rest of the afternoon, you and I.'

'Nothing disturbs me, but I shall be glad when to-day is over.'

'Of course, you will, Granny.' Then there came silence.

Luce's heart was almost too full to speak ; she was with her lover in thought, sharing his agitation and suspense, intensified a thousand-fold by her vivid imagination. If prayers and wishes could bring a man success, Dick would certainly triumph before the evening. Luce looked upon him as a martyr to envy and ill-feeling, an innocent victim of some frightful misfortune or mistake ; it was the principle that was at stake, not merely a party contest for the advantage of Tory or Liberal, but the question of a man's whole life, his honour and peace. Her own feelings need not be considered in the matter, she cared personally neither for the glories of debate nor for the applause of the senate, but she did care that Dick's character should be cleared, and a way opened for him to be good and honest and happy. Never were silent prayers offered with greater fervency, nor did purer wishes emanate from a human breast, than the petitions and aspirations that rose from the two anxious women, sitting together in that quiet room, one just entering upon, the other quitting, life ; one stepping over the threshold of careless childhood, the other leaving behind her every stray glimmer of hope and illusion. Not a sound broke the silence ; the red-hot coals dropped with an occasional thud into the marble grate below, and the slight noise seemed to startle the two patient watchers each time it occurred. Luce made up the fire, handed Granny her afternoon draught, and, as twilight came, pulled down the blinds, giving one last lingering look to the landscape she shut out ; the shadow-like masses of the woods loomed dark and gloomy against the red sky, while, from the west, masses of threatening black cloud drifted up and a few snow-flakes began to float lightly down.

'I think we shall have a snow-storm,' said Luce, returning from her expedition to the window, and lighting a pair of candles, which she placed on a small table at Granny's side.

'I hope Mrs. Vincent and the girls will not be delayed in it ; they ought to be home now, ought they not, Luce ?'

'Very soon, Granny ; we must not be too impatient, you know, we cannot tell what may delay them ; as long as there was something interesting to hear they would stay.'

'Oh, how dreadful it is to be helpless and old !' Granny gave a groan. Luce flew to her side.

'Dear, dear Granny, I am here ; do let me be a help and a comfort to you.'

'Yes, child, yes, but oh, my boy, my boy, why is he not here, why can't I welcome him and love him as I long to ? Do you think he is unhappy, Luce ?—say.'

'I think he is too busy to be unhappy; remember he has a great deal to do ; men are more fortunate in that respect than we are.'

'He thinks I misjudge him, I am sure, yet I believe in his innocence most thoroughly, and would give all I have to see him cleared. Tell him this, Luce, you will tell him when you see him ; and besides to-morrow you must bring him to me.'

'Yes, yes,' said Luce soothingly, 'we must try to get him here to-morrow.'

Granny's strange excitement now abated somewhat ; she drank her tea reasonably, and became almost cheerful over the hot toast. A little later she complained of fatigue, and requested to be left alone.

'I will come and tell you the very moment I hear any news,' said Luce cheerfully ; she dared not anticipate the prospect of the news being bad. Luce ran lightly downstairs, and listened a moment, looking over the banisters. The lamps were lit, but the house was wrapped in inexplicable silence. She made her way into the hall, where the queer old prints hung, and the large marble-topped table stood littered with newspapers. Since Granny's illness their number had greatly diminished. Mr. Vincent took in *The Field*, but the array of Dick's sporting newspapers had vanished, and Mrs. Carrol's *Spectator*, and *Academy*, and *Saturday Review* were stopped from motives of economy. Mrs. Vincent's sole literature consisted of *The Queen* and *The Christian World*. Luce took up *The Christian World*, and read marvellous accounts of 'dealings' and 'conversions,' but her mind received none of the sense though her eye wandered over the words. The long delay was so strange—where could they be ? She put down the paper and opened the front door carefully a few inches, a handful of cold snow was immediately blown into her face.

'Oh, if they should be delayed all night, and Granny linger on another twelve hours in suspense !' she thought with terror.

It was only eight miles to West Thorpe. Granny's well-fed horses could trot over the ground in no time. Then why were they not here already ? Action, toil, and labour—anything was better than this suspense. Hark ! The old house-dog in the stables began to bark, yes, it was a sound of wheels deadened by the falling snow, but still sufficiently audible ; presently the carriage stopped under the porch, and, as the footman jumped down to ring the bell, Luce threw open the door.

'What, Luce !' cried Mrs. Vincent's shrill voice, 'what do you mean by coming out in the snow like this ? you'll catch your death of cold.'

'Oh, Mrs. Vincent! tell me, tell me, please, quick, what has happened?'

'La, child! give me a moment's time to breathe? I must shake the snow off my cloak. Dear me, it *is* cold to-night. Vincent, take care of the step.'

'What has happened?' pleaded Luce again, with trembling hands assisting Mrs. Vincent to unrobe.

'I declare your fingers are all thumbs. Make haste, Dolly and Eliza! the draft is awful from that hall door.'

'Oh! Mr. Vincent, please, has Dick been returned? What is the result of the election?' again asked Luce.

'Curse him, yes!' blurted out Mr. Vincent gruffly, going up to the table where the butler had placed some sherry and glasses.

'Returned! Really an M.P.!' cried Luce, her eyes dilating with surprised happiness. 'Really, really, oh! what delicious news. I must fly to tell Granny.'

'You can tell her that Sir Hilary is dead at the same time,' observed Mrs. Vincent coldly. 'She will be glad to hear that her grandson has stepped into Parliament over a grave.'

'A first-rate Conservative, and such a judge of horses!' mourned Uncle Vincent, between his gulps.

'Dead! no, I will not tell her that, bad news can wait till to-morrow, but she shall know about Dick at once,' cried Luce.

Unheeding further remonstrances from Mrs. Vincent, Luce ran upstairs, joy lending wings to her feet, but stopped outside Granny's door, to still the beatings of her heart. She must on no account startle Granny; she remembered a French play she had once read, '*La joie fait peur*'; she knew that sudden happiness might prove as fatal as sudden grief. Composing herself by an effort she turned the handle of the door gently, and walked quietly in. Granny sat in the chair as she had left her, her head thrown back on the pillow, her withered hands folded demurely in her lap, motionless.

'She is asleep,' said Luce; 'shall I wake her, even to hear good news?'

She approached on tiptoe; the old lady's face was calm as marble, the lashes had fallen over the tired eyes. 'Granny!' softly whispered Luce. The voice was as soft as a breath of summer wind. The old lady did not stir. 'Oh, Granny! good news, Dick has conquered.' Still no answer. 'Granny, don't you hear? Listen! We are all so happy. 'Granny, dear Granny!' She came closer and took one of the small, thin hands. 'How cold you are, Granny!' then in a

frightened and shriller voice, forgetting all her precautions, 'Oh, Granny, do speak, speak to your little Luce; wake, Granny, wake!' Luce cried and begged—the obstinate sleeper never moved. 'Oh, Granny, *do* wake.' Luce sank down and laid her head in the old lady's lap. No gentle pressure rewarded her, no fond hand stroked her hair. Then Luce felt as if her heart would break, an awful terror encompassed her, the silence, the coldness, the rigid stillness, that stillness that is never found in life, terrified and awed her. She began, wildly and passionately, to kiss and press the withered unresponsive cheek, the cold lips, the motionless eyes; she sobbed and cried and entreated. 'Granny, Granny, hear me!' rang in louder and shriller accents through the room. Mrs. Vincent heard, and mounted the stairs to investigate. The cry of a human soul in agony was not one she was accustomed to. She did not approve, nor would she encourage, any unwonted show of emotion. It savoured too much of the old rebellious Adam, which in well brought-up girls was not becoming. On the threshold she paused. The cry had ceased. The echo of her own footfall nearly startled her, for the wings of death have a wide and soothing sweep. She looked again. Granny had passed into the everlasting silence, and Luce, crouched together, now stopped her moaning, and lay dumb and motionless at her feet. Even Mrs. Vincent was awed. She closed the door gently, and went away without speaking.

CHAPTER XL.

WHERE ALL IS STILL.

LUCE was very still. She had seen Granny buried, helped to heap the flowers and the wreaths upon her coffin, knelt in speechless sorrow by the upturned earth, beheld the village turn out with one spontaneous tribute of love and regret, the stalwart young men carrying their heavy burden to the churchyard, an endless procession of mourning folk winding like a long slow worm up the village lane, and she wondered that they could sob and cry and feel. For herself she felt nothing but a cold heavy void. It was so hard, so hard, she kept repeating, that Granny should have been snatched away just as all her hopes were fulfilled—that she should not behold her darling boy triumphant and successful. Hers was all the heart-weariness and sorrow, and she might not live to see the joy. Luce felt the injustice of Life, the cruelty of Fate. To all of us this feeling of impotent

striving and dumb rage must come in the course of our lives : to some earlier, to some later, to all terribly. Whether it be the boy's disappointments or the man's foiled love and ambition, or the old person's feeble querulousness, to each and all there comes a moment when we question Fate, when we try hopelessly to guess at the enigmas of life, and unravel the tangled chain of events ; when we cry out, 'If I had known,' or murmur despairingly, 'It is no use.' And that cry is the worst of all. It is the open gate to defiance, recklessness, and negation. Luce's sorrow had stormed itself out. She was quiet, but she was indifferent. Granny's end seemed a useless sacrifice. Now that she was gone, half the savour of life was gone with her. Luce scarcely thought of her lover in these days. He was there, she had given her life to him, and in due course they would marry, and Granny's wishes be carried out, but it was Granny herself that occupied Luce's mind. Directly after the funeral she had returned to Highview. Long Leam with Mrs. Vincent as its mistress seemed to her horrible ; Dick, with what she thought unnecessary courtesy, having intimated to Mrs. Vincent that she might remain until it suited her to move. It did not suit Mrs. Vincent at present ; she was really, for once in her life, ill from vexation and disappointment. To find that the prize had slipped from her after all her efforts ; that Granny in death, as in life, true to her affections, left everything in her will to Dick, and only her savings and a few personal effects to Vincent, besides the small fortune to which he was naturally entitled, was a crushing blow. Mrs. Vincent wandered from room to room wringing her hands, and lamenting ; while the housemaids, with the alacrity that distinguishes servants on these occasions, restored things to their usual places, and rapidly removed all signs of Granny's presence.

'To think that I should have gained nothing, nothing !' she moaned to herself, stopping an instant to scold the maid for leaving a stray pin upon the carpet. 'And that fool of a husband of mine goes about the stables just as usual, feeling the horses' legs and inquiring if they have had exercise ; exercise, psha ! when we shan't be able to afford even a carriage for the future.'

Mrs. Vincent's opinion of men's wisdom had never been high, but in these days it sank to an unfathomable depth. Even her woman's wit had failed. There was nothing to be done, nothing ! With the dead there is no reckoning. Impotent anger and rage filled Mrs. Vincent's heart just as it did Luce's, only they were angry with a different object ; but

it did not alter matters much ; the dead are intangible as fate, and as inexorable. Still, there she was for the present, and there she meant to remain as long as possible. Dolly and Eliza laboured at their needlework and drawing as usual, and Vincent went about the stables. Mrs. Vincent tried to imagine that there was nothing changed, but the entire evening's conversation passed in one long querulous lament, Vincent smoking and giving forth an occasional monosyllabic repartee or unintelligible grunt, his wife pouring out a voluble stream of sorrows. Dick was in London busy with deeds and lawyers, Luce had returned home. A cloud of dull repose seemed to have settled upon the Carrol family. Messrs. Cherry and Appleton had announced they did not mean to put in action the warrant against Dick ; the unlikelihood of the theft, and the doubtful evidence, were the reasons they gave ; in reality they did not wish to quarrel with the new owner of Long Leam, now also become a Member of Parliament. Sir Hilary's death had changed everything ; he was not there to urge them on, and back up the proceedings. So they wisely argued that the loss was his, and that Lady Fenchurch in her own interest would not press the matter any further.

They were right, as people who speculate on the weaknesses of others usually are. Dick desired nothing better than complete oblivion of the past, and Lady Fenchurch's horror at the sudden shock of her widowhood fortunately produced a state of nervous ill-health which deprived her of all wish or power to enter upon business matters. But the gossips had a fine feast of it for all that. Dick, always tolerably popular, grew to be a kind of hero, and according to usual custom all the blame was lavished on the woman. Sir Hilary's will revealed the state of his mind, and now that the murder was out, Gubbins did not scruple to tell all he knew. Soon it was hinted abroad everywhere that Sir Hilary had committed suicide, driven to desperation by his wife's unfaithfulness, and the partiality she displayed for Dick, which had led her to make him a present of her pearl necklace. Dick naturally, as always happens in such cases, heard nothing of these reports ; and Lady Fenchurch, wrapped in her mourning and absorbed by her delicate nerves, heard nothing either. So the public gloated over the scandal, and the scandal grew and grew till it reached Mrs. Vincent's ears. It might have been supposed that now the concealment of the necklace could in nowise further Mrs. Vincent's plans, she would have returned it surreptitiously, while keeping herself free from blame, to its rightful owner ; but if she had lost her money she had at least

obtained her revenge, and Mrs. Vincent was not the woman to forego that. When through the gossip of the servants it first became clear to her that innumerable lies floated about, she rejoiced greatly. If she suffered, it was at least a kind of meagre satisfaction to think that others suffered too; that rumour was busy with a woman's reputation, malignant reports filled the air, and happiness trembled in the balance. Dick, too, might find himself embarrassed by Lady Fenchurch, compromised, and annoyed. If Luce had but one spark of spirit in her she would jilt him, and refuse to play a secondary part. Many things might yet happen, Mrs. Vincent argued; she must wait and see; it should take a great deal to dislodge her from the position she occupied. Perhaps Dick would go abroad, vacate the place if affairs became too vexatious; and then who could better remain and fill the post of trusted manager than Mrs. Vincent? It was to her interest, she reflected, to soothe and humour him; she must make herself necessary, must study his wishes. She began at once by writing to him confidential letters, full of suggestions, pleasant gossip, kindly advice and offers. Dick read the letters with astonishment, remembering the state of open warfare in which they had always lived, and thinking that the loss of Granny must have weakened her head. He speculated for a little, then laid the letters unanswered amid the goodly pile of business communications, bills, circulars, and lawyers' epistles with which he was surrounded. Mrs. Vincent meanwhile burrowed like a mole in the tortuous underground passages she was labouring to excavate; discovered the butler drank the sherry, and wrote to Dick to ask if she should dismiss him in the latter's interests, then knocked off one of the under-gardeners, declaring that it was no use keeping seven men to do the work of six. The poor fellow, morose and disheartened, returned to his wife, just risen from her bed with a new-born baby in her arms, while three other small children toddled about and clutched at her skirts, and talked of applying to the parish. But Mrs. Vincent believed she had done a good deed and saved the new owner of Long Leam fourteen shillings a week, which in these necessitous times is no trifle. She sent the chintzes to be washed, and put all Granny's books away in a cupboard; 'nasty freethinking works they were too,' she remarked by the way to the old housemaid.

The latter wondered and murmured that 'Missus had always been a God-fearing lady.'

'No doubt, Ann, no doubt,' accentuated Mrs. Vincent, 'but

that was in spite of reading those bad books ; she would have been better without them, and you know the Lord's Prayer says, "Lead us not into temptation"—bad books are a great temptation. I hope you will never read them, Ann.'

'Lor' bless you, mum,' said old Ann with a laugh, 'I'm no scholar, though my niece, the third housemaid, is ; she can read beautiful, print and handwriting and all.'

'There's the danger, Ann, young people are so easily puffed up ; tell her to mind, and to come to me for her books.'

Mrs. Vincent was feeling better ; it did her good, and braced her up to give advice, and she flicked away with the duster she carried right merrily.

'Yes, Ann,' continued Mrs. Vincent ; 'things have been happy-go-lucky here too long. You all want brushing up ; poor old Mrs. Carrol was past her work ; latterly she had grown doting ; she had a habit of believing everybody ; and you know, Ann, that leads to everybody cheating you.'

'Indeed, mum !' said Ann, inserting her gaunt body between an ebony cabinet and the wall, in order to pursue cleaning operations more commodiously.

'Yes, Ann. Of course it is quite right that you should respect your late mistress ; she left you a nice little legacy to buy mourning with, and all that, but abuses which were very well in the old days must be done away with now. For instance, that unlimited beer. Now you don't tell me it is necessary for a woman to have five meals a day, and beer and cheese at eleven o'clock. It's positively disgusting. You don't take luncheon, I hope ?'

She turned suddenly, and found the unfortunate Ann, who, wiping her mouth with her apron, thought sorrowfully of the luncheon-hour, which was already past and gone.

'Well, mum, one feels a little dry if one has been up since six o'clock, always dusting and muddling about in the dirt.'

'Dry, indeed ! A respectable woman should not give way to the sins of the flesh. I never take luncheon.'

'No, mum ; but ladies is different.'

'I should hope they were, indeed ! But, if I am spared here, please God, I see before me a sphere of endless usefulness. I shall effect a revolution.'

'I am sure you will, mum.' And Ann, reflecting that with her little savings she could live comfortably in a cottage of her own, determined at once to give warning.

Thus admonishing, Mrs. Vincent almost felt happy. She had the rare faculty of believing in herself ; she never doubted her own intentions nor distrusted her own capacity ; if there was any-

thing to be done she could do it, and do it better than any one else. And this sense of perfect self-satisfaction stood her in good stead in the ordinary difficulties of life.

She felt herself born to rule, and resented it as a grievance if she were forced to obey. The rude coarseness of her husband and the meek submission of her well-trained daughters nourished this belief, for who could fail to be superior to a lout who drank brandy and water, and preferred the company of stable-men, or to girls who had seen and known nothing of the world, and merely answered, 'Yes, mamma,' to all observations? Mrs. Vincent laboured under the disadvantage of living only with people who were manifestly her inferiors, or with those who for their own ends pretended to be so. As lady patroness at bazaars, as secretary of the Young Women's Aid Society, or dispenser of clothing-clubs, her energy and stubbornness were appreciated and required; and she was so accustomed to observe her friends bow down to her decisions and refrain from questioning her judgment, that she ceased to think of herself as fallible. The consciousness of high rectitude produced a kind of warp in her conscience which enabled her to commit with impunity actions which in others she would have styled reprehensible, if not absolutely criminal. If it be therefore asked how Mrs. Vincent contrived to combine piety with uncrupulousness, the answer is that her piety was so compounded as to cover a multitude of sins with a conveniently thin mantle of propriety. Occasionally, perhaps, pricks of conscience made themselves felt, rapidly however subdued by the reflection that her liver must be out of order, otherwise things would appear as usual in a pleasing and meritorious light. Uncle Vincent was not so happy as his wife. He reproached himself acutely for the part he had taken in the election, saying bitterly that if he had known which way the wind blew, he would have stuck to the ship in spite of everything. Now, of course, he had alienated his nephew for ever. It was not likely he would ever befriend him again, buy horses of him, or take his opinion about a bet. It was deuced unfortunate, certainly, but then no power on earth could foresee that Granny would die without altering her will, that Dick would succeed in getting into Parliament, and that Sir Hilary would be such a madman as to cut his own throat (for the belief in suicide was now generally diffused). Vincent meditated sorrowfully; he was verging on middle age, and he had no prospects; his sons were growing up, and his own appetite for racing and horseflesh remained undiminished; his weight had increased too, and his purse

grown lighter, his indulgent mother was dead, and his wife though admirable could scarcely be called indulgent. In tobacco alone he found a solace; it was a cheap and a satisfactory luxury—it eased the mind, and dulled the brain; and so long as a man could look at the future through a cloud of smoke, he was not so very much to be pitied. So he withdrew himself more and more from female society, and was never to be seen without a pipe in his mouth. That, at least at present, he comforted himself, was a habit and a privilege reserved for the stronger sex, and one of which it would require some years' exercise of the female franchise to deprive the lords of the creation.

CHAPTER XLI.

LUCE HEARS SOMETHING.

MATTERS at Highview Castle were similarly in confusion. At first a general sense of triumph, neatly tempered by decorous mourning for Mrs. Carrol, animated everyone. Now, however, that the first sense of jubilation had worn off, various causes combined to produce a reaction. First and foremost, Mr. Highview was not quite satisfied about the affair of the necklace. While the election lasted, excitement and business caused him to regard Dick's conduct in a more favourable light, but now Mr. Highview felt strongly that his going off to London, and apparent absorption in the affairs of his property, showed a want of respect and proper regard for his future uncle's feelings. Mr. Highview himself was blessed with an inconvenient delicacy, which made him careful not to offend, but which, *per contra*, inclined him to exact more from his neighbours. This sensitive, impressionable nature was shared by his daughter, and formed one of the reasons of her dislike to general society. Lady Eleanor, on her part, in her drives and visits, had heard the story of the supposed suicide, considerably garbled and added to, and began to fear that a man so hampered, morally and socially, could scarcely prove a desirable husband. Not that the moral responsibilities affected her deeply, but the social difficulties were of course not easily to be got over. Lady Fenchurch's position might prove a difficulty, Dick foolishly think himself bound to marry, now he had compromised her; and, even if he declined, she might hamper him with claims and petulances sufficient to make his life a burden. Lady Eleanor was not disturbed by the contemplation of Dick's unhappiness,

but her pride revolted at the idea of Luce coming off second best, and of her young niece's domestic affairs being the talk of the county. One may have corns, but so long as nobody else perceives, by one's limping gait, that the shoe pinches, little irrevocable harm is done. Such was Lady Eleanor's view of life, she regarded from the outside and based it solely on superficial appearances. No one had less patience than Lady Eleanor with maudlin sentimentalities, or the feeble self-torturings of morbid women; she had a grand constitution and splendid health, and recognised no evils but a doubtful social position. Maud, as usual her confidant in the matter, cordially agreed, remarking that Lady Eleanor was always right.

'Ah, my dear!' placidly observed the elder lady, turning her hand round to note the brilliant flashing of the gems upon her white fingers, 'if everyone had your common sense, girls and boys would not be so difficult to manage; you are remarkably prudent and far-seeing for your age; but Luce, on the contrary, is quite a child, and so romantic.'

Maud concurred, deploring unprofitable romance.

'After all,' continued Lady Eleanor, lounging luxuriously among the cushions of her boudoir, 'a trip abroad, a short absence, will assist the forgetfulness of the world. Society asks no better than to condone the follies of the rich, and Dick will be rich now. Perhaps a honeymoon tour will do all that is necessary, and Luce is so plain that to find an eligible husband might be difficult. You, of course, Maud, handsome as you are, have had even less chance.' Lady Eleanor never spared friends more than enemies. 'Men don't care to saddle themselves with pauper relations.'

'I don't think my husband will be troubled by relations,' said Maud, tossing her head.

'Quite right, my dear, sensible as usual; an impecunious mother-in-law always in want of a dinner and borrowing a shilling to pay her cabs is the very thing a man dreads.'

'He needn't dread it in my case.'

'But then you see they do not know. I am sure young Mr. Sterney, for instance, could not face such a prospect.'

'No; he spends too much on burlesque actresses to have anything to spare for his mother-in-law.'

'Exactly so; but to return to Luce. Of course it is my earnest desire to get the child provided for. I have done my duty by her hitherto, but I shall not consider I have been a real mother to her till I see her well settled. If I was quite sure about Dick——'

‘Can you not speak to him, ask him to be honest and straightforward?’

‘Men are never honest to one woman about another.’

‘That is a difficulty.’

‘Then there is the woman. It is impossible to foresee how Lady Fenchurch will behave.’

‘She has ordered her mourning. I saw it at Miss Shear’s in West Thorpe, beautiful crape, and quite a new style of trimming. You know how hideous and heavy crape usually is ; now this was positively becoming.’

‘That is a very bad sign. A widow who thinks of what is becoming does not mean to mourn long.’

‘Dr. Pilule is always with her, they say.’

‘He is a young man : this is worse and worse.’

‘I suppose Dick knows his own affairs best ; he is engaged to Luce.’

‘Yes, and that is my greatest comfort. He understands what is due to our family and position—he never would dare to play fast and loose with Mr. Highview’s daughter.’

‘I suppose not,’ said Maud bitterly, reflecting that men would be troubled by no such scruples in her own case.

‘Certainly not. And Luce has been so well brought up that she will do whatever she is told.’

Luce herself made her appearance at that instant, and the conversation was presently pitched in another key, but Luce had heard enough to cause her to understand that in some way her fate was involved. The same evening, breaking through the indifference she had displayed since Granny’s death, she followed Maud into the cosy chintz room, whose luxuries had not yet lost their charm for that young lady, ‘Maud ! dear——’ she hesitated.

‘Well, what is it ? Help me off with this dress, please ; what a bore things are that fasten behind. I notice you always wear full bodies and bands ; quite right, they are not half the trouble.’

‘Oh ! I have no figure. I don’t care a bit about the fit of a dress as you do.’

‘You should care more, Luce.’ Maud fixed her bright mocking eyes on her friend’s face. ‘If you don’t take care, you’ll be made a catspaw of——’

‘Maud, you have heard something ; what is it ?’

‘Have you guessed nothing, you innocent baby ?’

Maud sat down in front of her glass and proceeded to uncoil her beautiful hair, touching it lovingly and delicately, with the reverence due from a beautiful woman to one of her chief

weapons of fascination. Luce watched her silently; as an artist she was keenly alive to the subtle charm of beauty.

‘And so you have guessed nothing, you poor dear! How long is it since you have heard from Dick?’

‘Dick! He does not write often.’

‘So I should think. And have you talked of the wedding day——?’

‘Oh, Maud, I am in no hurry; poor Granny is only just dead, remember.’ Luce dropped into a chair, and laid her hands in her lap.

‘Granny was an old woman and you and Dick are young; you cannot mourn for ever, it is scarcely flattering to your intended.’

‘He has said nothing yet.’

‘Has it never occurred to you that he might have reasons for not hurrying on his marriage? Usually, a lover is impatient for the woman to name the day.’

‘A lover, yes.’ Luce thought to herself that where the love was on one side only, things might be different.

‘He *is* your lover, I suppose, as you are engaged to him, and you have always talked so much about not marrying for anything but love.’

‘Yes,’ echoed Luce, in a faint voice.

‘Very well, then; if I were you I should not be satisfied to have his name coupled with that of another woman——’

‘Another woman!’ The voice though faint was no longer listless.

‘Another woman, an old love—Lady Fenchurch.’

‘Who couples their names? What do you mean? It is all a lie.’ Luce’s eyes flashed, as quiet orbs can, when their owners are strongly excited.

‘If you were not so absorbed in your own thoughts you would hear what is said around you and know *this* is not a lie.’

‘Not a lie?’

‘You echo like a parrot. Don’t you want to know what is said about you and Dick?’—‘Yes.’

‘With all your philosophy you’re as sensitive to the opinions of others as anyone I know.’

‘Go on, please,’ said Luce, with a gasp, steeling herself to endure a moral surgical operation.

‘So I will when I have arranged my thoughts. Did you ever hear the particulars of Sir Hilary Fenchurch’s death?’

‘Of course I heard he was dead—of a fit, I think—but I had never seen him, you know.’

‘And therefore, though a good Christian, you could only pay him complimentary mourning, but yet his death affects you personally. Do you know how he died?’—‘No.’

‘He committed suicide.’ Maud leant forward and darted out these words with the tragic precision of an accomplished actress.

She did not miss her point. Luce started back.

‘He, suicide! Why?’

‘Because he found out something about his wife and Dick that did not please him—and because—can’t you guess?’

‘Lady Fenchurch!’ Luce clasped her hands together nervously, trying to clear her brain sufficiently to comprehend the gist of the matter. ‘Lady Fenchurch is nothing to Dick—it is all a mistake.’

‘A mistake then that is likely to have remarkably disagreeable consequences,’ observed Maud, plaiting up her hair. ‘When a woman’s husband commits suicide on account of her love affairs, especially if he disinherits her in his will, it is not likely to improve her position in the world.’

‘Do people say this?’ asked Luce, her eyes wide open in a stare of puzzled terror.

‘They say it, and also that she gave Dick her necklace to pay his debts—it was never found, you remember; and now you know as much as I do about the matter.’ Maud turned to her looking-glass and stuck her heavy plait up with hair-pins. There was silence for a few moments. Luce breathed painfully, but she did not speak. Maud was obliged to look over her shoulder to note the effect of her communication.

‘How silent you are—don’t you care? I must say Dick has not treated you well; however, I suppose he would hardly tell you all this, and he trusted that you would never find it out. Poor child, did it mind? Believe me, there are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it.’

‘I suppose you meant kindly in telling me this,’ Luce said, as she rose slowly, knotting her hands while she spoke, ‘but I wish—I wish I were still in ignorance.’

‘Of course you do; but really, Luce, it is better sometimes to look things in the face. Wilful ignorance is the act of a fool.’

‘You have often called me a fool. I suppose everyone who trusts and believes in a fellow-creature is a fool?’

‘Don’t become cynical, Luce, it is bad taste now—everyone talks of universal brotherhood—pray don’t go away in this abrupt manner.’ Luce made a movement towards the door.

'You look so pale, and you won't sleep, and only fret yourself to death. Do stay, and let us talk it over.'

'I cannot talk, I feel choked.'

'You are dreadfully sensitive,' said Maud, looking complacently at her own fair face in the glass; 'there is not a bit of use in being too good for this world.'

'The world is too good for me,' said Luce, escaping as she uttered this paradox. Maud shrugged her shoulders. She had experienced already so many slips between the cup and the lip that she grew to regard them as part of the world's economy, and reflected that, after all, she was none the worse—if one marriage fell through, it was easy to look about for another. As long as youth and beauty endured there was no ground for despondency; but then Luce, she supposed, really cared. What a silly a girl must be, *really* to care. Maud, smiling at her friend's infatuation, placed her candle by her bedside and laid a new railway novel close to it, with which she purposed to read herself to sleep; then she fell upon her knees and said her prayers. The habit taught her, and persevered in from childhood, had become second nature. The petitions she presented were generally mechanical, sometimes almost pagan in their outspokenness, yet it was one of the few practices she clung to superstitiously. She could never tell; she might be seized with illness, a fire might break out, it was better to say one's prayers, and have some kind of claim on the protection of the Deity. After that, an exciting novel to lull one to sleep offered an agreeable variety.

Luce, shut up in her small bedchamber, which Lady Eleanor considered sufficiently furnished with the barest and simplest of necessities, knelt down to no evening prayers with the calm indifference of Maud. She locked the door, placed the candle on the dressing-table, and began to walk up and down, up and down, restlessly. The wild animal which is in each of us was let loose; she could not rest, she could not sit, she wanted movement; she had mourned so deeply and vicariously for Granny, her thoughts had been lately raised so much to heaven and the joys and mystery of eternity, that it caused her a shock and a wrench to fix them suddenly on more mundane objects, to decide what was truth in the world's verdict, and reflect on the duties owing to society. Society, the fetish to which her young life had always been sacrificed; the insatiable monster that had swallowed up all her youthful impulses, and turned her most innocent joys to gall. In her marriage at least, she had hoped to escape from the bondage of society; she was taking the man she loved, without afterthought of rank or fortune; with him

she meant to lead a true, a natural, a human life, there were to be no clouds between them, no shadow of an untruth. He had told her plainly about his former love, he had done nothing underhand towards that love, all had seemed simple and straightforward and clear, but now—Luce pressed her hands to her head, the throbbing veins seemed as though they would burst. Suicide was a crime. Luce, reared in Christian habits of thought, could not persuade herself that men had the right to throw away the precious gift of life whenever they were weary and sick at heart; it was cowardly, she felt, to desert a post of danger—nothing could palliate or excuse the crime. And to this Dick and the wretched man's wife were partners. They had driven Sir Hilary to despair that prompted the deed—they were partners in guilt. The world had already visited some of the consequences upon the woman; her reputation was assailed. Defenceless, she could only go to destruction; Dick must not leave her now. Formerly it had appeared a duty for him to forget her, and to marry another woman, it seemed like closing the forbidden book, and turning strenuously away to a higher and a mightier right; now the poor sinning creature had a claim to the man's compassion, his services, and his love. Luce shuddered. The shadow of the cross had fallen on her life, the great mystery of sacrifice and suffering was revealed to her. Just because she was the stronger—because, in the power of her love, she could soar above the petty interests and scruples of ordinary folk—for that very reason it was her duty to take the initiative, to plunge the dagger into her own heart, and draw it out again smiling. She thrust open the window, for a breath of air. The sky was dark with deepest blue, and pierced with stars, which flickered and twinkled in innumerable clusters. They seemed to befriend her, to encourage her in the vastness which made her feel only one small trembling unit in the throbbing universe. Her one little life was so short, her one sacrifice so infinitesimal, while the mighty right was eternal and immutable. Gradually her heart ceased to beat so violently, a sense of cold calmed the fever in her veins. The trees rustled faintly in the chill night air. She waited till the crowing of a distant cock, and the gradual sotto-voce tuning of the birds awaking from their nests, warned her it was morning. Then she slowly shut the window and withdrew into the room, which now felt damp and chilly. She undressed quickly, and, shivering, flung herself into bed. Everything bright and beautiful was slipping from her; she welcomed the mere sense of fatigue and exhaustion, that lulled her nerves, and numbed the aching pain that gripped her in its powerful grasp.

CHAPTER XLII.

LOVERS' PARTING.

LUCE was not one to let the grass grow under her feet ; she shrank and quivered keenly under the blow that struck her ; but the resolve formed in her midnight hour of communion beneath the friendly stars never for an instant deserted her. She knew that she had renounced happiness, but when she saw the straight path of duty stretching out clearly before her, she felt calmer and quieter. There is that advantage to be gained in acting rather on principle than on impulse, that, once a decision is formed, a sense of peace and directness immediately becomes its accompaniment. Luce appeared at breakfast the next morning calm and unruffled ; and Maud, who looked up quickly at her entrance, expecting to see some traces of the night's struggle, noticed nothing at all remarkable in her appearance, but an almost imperceptible quiver of the eyelids. Lady Eleanor's toilet, which was of an elaborate description, requiring both time and attention on the part of a first-rate French maid, never permitted her to appear much before noon. If, therefore, any one of the family desired to speak to her, it was necessary to ask for entrance to her bedroom. Luce, as soon as the family meal was over, knocked at her door. Lady Eleanor thought she had come about some arrangements for a prospective dinner party, and admitted her at once.

'Will you write the invitations, Luce? Here are some cards.' Luce submitted, and taking a seat at the writing-table, obediently indited notes and directed envelopes. When she had finished, and Lady Eleanor leant back reflectively in her armchair trying to remember if anyone had been inadvertently forgotten, she said quietly, holding her pen, still wet with ink, before her,

'Aunt, do you object to my asking Dick here to spend the day? I have some matters to talk over, and writing is difficult.'

Lady Eleanor started. Could the child have overheard her conversation? Was she anxious to press on the marriage so as to leave no loophole of escape to her future husband? On second thoughts, she decided that Luce had not sufficient guile in her composition to render such scheming likely.

'You wish to see Dick?' she answered after a pause, which made Luce look up nervously.

'Yes, aunt, I have scarcely seen him since our engagement, and so many things have happened ; there is no objection surely.'

'No, certainly, no objection.' Lady Eleanor passed her thin cambric handkerchief across her mouth. 'But Dick is in London. I fancy he is detained by business.'

'It is only a few hours' journey from town; Dick thinks nothing of travelling.'

'Well, it is for him to decide. Do you wish me to write and invite him?'

'If you do not mind I will write myself.'

'Certainly.' Lady Eleanor was puzzled. Luce did not generally act with decision, in fact the formal accusation brought against her was of being always in the clouds. 'I suppose you wish to speak to him about the wedding-day? It is rather strange that he should not already have mentioned it.'

'No, no, he is in deep mourning and we are in no hurry; it is better that we should learn to know each other.'

This was not at all what Lady Eleanor desired. She had a horror of long engagements.

'I hope to goodness, my dear, your engagement will not drag on indefinitely. Nothing is so injurious both to the temper and the prospects of a young person.'

'I don't think you need fear. It will not drag on interminably,' said Luce, with a strange smile.

'Very well, then, you can write to Dick.'

Luce availed herself of the desired permission, but forbore to announce the fact to Maud, who consumed herself in helpless wonder as to the course events were taking.

Dick answered Luce's letter in the affirmative, and a few days later she made her way down the approach to meet him on his arrival from the station. The dog-cart had been sent for him, and very soon she espied him driving it himself, and looking particularly bright and happy. Luce was nervous and miserable. There is something so cruel in being the bearer of bad news to one who advances unconsciously to his fate with a smile on his lips and perfect trust in his heart. For an instant Luce regretted that she had ever invited him; she could have written, it would have been easier, and then she need not have seen his smiling, happy face unclouded by a care before her, while she uttered the fateful words. No, that was a cowardly thought after all; she had no reason to suppose he would care. Did he not tell her he only married to please his grandmother? Possibly he would thank Luce for what she was going to say. She braced herself to smile at him and say good morning. He pulled up immediately, threw the reins to the groom, and jumped out. In another instant he was walking beside her, away from the house towards the shrubbery.

'It was very jolly of you to send for me, Luce,' he said lightly, breaking off a bit of laurustinus and sticking it in his button-hole. 'I shouldn't have thought of coming if you had not written, for I don't believe Lady Eleanor appreciates my company particularly.'

'Oh, yes, Dick, she has spoken so kindly of you lately.'

'I find everyone much kinder since I have succeeded to Long Leam,' he said with a laugh. 'After all, the world is a good place to live in, provided one has plenty of money.'

'Dick!'

'Don't preach, Luce. I'm going to be awfully steady, pay all my debts (that tailor of mine, who used always to dun me, now does nothing but beg me for custom and offer me credit). It's a real joke, I can tell you; and then I'm going to keep up the old place just as Granny liked, and you can look upon the fine house she was so proud of as your own property. I think she would be pleased if she knew, don't you, Luce?'

'I wonder if she does know. Don't you think love must be subtle enough to pierce through space, and that even in heaven she must feel how much we love her, and how we miss her? Dick, she was so good to me; no human being ever was so good to me.'

'She was an old dear,' responded Dick, flogging with his light cane at the tall grasses by the shrubbery walk. 'I'm extremely grateful to her. I don't know how I could have gone on much longer, I was horribly pressed for money.'

Luce put her hand to her heart. This speech more than corroborated all she had been told. The debts, the gift of the necklace, Lady Fenchurch's acceptable help.

'You will not want it so much now,' she said quietly.

'Oh, no; I shall take care. It is a great nuisance being in debt; but what is a fellow to do if he has not got the means?'

'I suppose one ought to deny one's self the luxuries one cannot afford?'

'You speak like a girl. What is the use of being a young man with prospects if one is to live like an ascetic old monk? However, thank goodness, that is all past and over now, and I shall be a model for the future—when we are married!' He turned and kissed her cheek impulsively.

'Oh, Dick!'

'Nonsense! Don't play the little prude. We shall be married soon now, I suppose?'

He drew her hand within his arm, and patted it kindly. His cordiality, his *insouciance*, his evident happiness, made Luce's

task harder. Her hopes died away, and her courage receded. After all, if he were satisfied, and glad to have her, and strained after no desires or discontented longings, why should she stir up muddy depths in the brightly springing fountain of his life? With a desperate determination she said,

‘Dick, was not that dreadful about Sir Hilary?’

‘Dreadful, dear; but it was lucky for me, too.’

‘Lucky?’

‘Well, you know, that beastly affair about the necklace was still hanging over me, and now, of course, it is at an end.’

‘And you are glad?’

‘Naturally.’

‘Oh, how I wish the thief could be found!’

‘So do I. But Dick’s voice was far less enthusiastic than that of Luce.’

Her fears deepened. Surely no one who was perfectly innocent could talk so calmly. She had not yet quite comprehended Dick’s nature, which, easily diverted from serious thought, attached no importance to facts of which the consequences were remote. As long as he saw himself threatened with so positive an evil as a jail, he suffered acutely, but the instant the immediate danger was removed he could talk with equanimity, or even sneer at intangible and unlikely difficulties. Luce liked to grapple firmly with a danger or an annoyance, to face it bravely, and note all its bearings; he preferred to evade, to procrastinate, to forget. The one temperament is essentially lymphatic, and of the soap-bubble kind, and results in a smooth gentlemanly egoism, which carries its owner agreeably over the shallows and rapids down the stream of life, until it meets with some overwhelming crashing torrent, in which it utterly collapses. The other temperament, nervous and excitable, spares no pains, and intensifies each trouble as it comes; but in the long run the dangers are surmounted, the rocks avoided, and the slender bark sails quietly out into the calm ocean. Luce wondered at Dick’s unconcern, and attached far graver importance to it than it deserved.

‘Dick,’ she continued timidly, twisting a bit of grass between her fingers, ‘Dick, what will become of Lady Fenchurch?’

‘Lady Fenchurch? By Jove, how should I know what becomes of pretty women when they are widows? I suppose she is rich, and she is young and independent; she will probably travel at first, and eventually marry.’

‘But—her first love?’

‘Her first love? Oh! you mean her fancy for me. I am

sure I don't know if it was her first love, I should think that very unlikely. Well, I suppose he has got over it now; we had enough annoyance about it. I don't think it was all roses for her with that old curmudgeon of a husband, and at any rate I am going to be married now.'

'We are not married yet.'

'Not yet; but I don't see why we should lose any time about it. I am my own master, and Mrs. Vincent must turn out whenever I choose.'

There was a pleasant conviction of power and freedom about Dick as he said these words. Not so very long ago Mrs. Vincent ruled supreme, and had the power to expel him from the house of which he was now the fortunate owner. The tables were certainly turned upon her in a most satisfactory fashion. Dick raised his head and threw back his shoulders with a consciously satisfied movement.

'But, Dick, there are others to be considered,' said the gentle tremulous voice at his side.

'Of course, I shall consider you.' Her hand had dropped from his arm, and the pale earnest face was turned away from him.

'I do not mean myself; I mean Lady Fenchurch.'

Dick gave a long whistle.

'By Jove! I don't think I need consider her. I thought we settled all that long ago.'

'But remember this dreadful story about the suicide; the poor thing is penniless and her reputation damaged.'

The pale face was turned towards him now and glowed with passionate pleading.

'What do you men? Really, Luce, excuse me, but I do not think this is at all your business.'

'Yes, Dick, it *is* my business. I should never feel happy if I were the means of making another woman wretched. She loved you and you loved her once, and she has lost a great—great deal for you—what a woman prizes most in the world, her good name, and I—how have I deserved to be so happy?'

'Because you are a first-rate good sterling little woman,' said her lover warmly, clutching at the hand she tried to withdraw from him, and getting it again into his possession. The pressure of his fingers thrilled through her body. She was longing to love him. It seemed very hard of her own accord to give him up.

'Oh, Dick, don't praise me. Indeed, indeed, I am not good or strong or wise, but I want you to be all that.'

'So I shall, some day. I am sure you'll live to be proud of me. You shall have everything you like, horses and dogs, and yards of flannel for the poor people, and the parson to dinner whenever you please.'

'No, no, don't tempt me; do try and understand. You can't build a house on a sandy foundation; your whole life mustn't be founded on a wrong. You must be strong and noble—strong for me and yourself.'

'I can't be strong without you. Now what do you want me to do?'

'Not to forsake the poor woman whose love for you has caused her so much suffering.'

'How?'

'I mean you must marry her and not me.'

Luce's head drooped. Her serious eyes no longer sought his to persuade and strengthen.

'You are mad,' he let her hand go angrily; 'you must be mad.'

'No, Dick, I have thought seriously and deeply, you owe her this reparation.'

'Stuff!'

'Dick do, do let us try to act rightly.'

'Act like lunatics, you mean,' he said, biting at his moustache; 'what would everyone say? Besides, I don't care to marry her now, when she has been talked about.'

'Oh, Dick, is that kind and manly? Her faults are yours, her mistakes are yours, her troubles were caused by you; she is free, she is alone and defenceless, to whom can she look for comfort but to you?'

'This is not fair, Luce, you have no right to make such an appeal to me. I understood you pretended to care for me?'

'So I do, I care more than ever I did.' A big tear rose to her eyes, but she dashed it away with her hand, 'it is because I care I say these things.'

'I must say it is a droll kind of affection,' he answered drily, 'that hands a man over to some other woman, a woman too who has played fast and loose with him——'

'Still she loved you.'

'I think she loved herself better.'

'It is the privilege of a man to protect a woman.'

'Certainly, but he is not bound to protect all women.'

Luce ceased speaking. She had exhausted her powers of argument and persuasion. Naturally inclined to be silent, it had cost her no slight effort to say all she did. She felt sick

and weary, and very hopeless. The path, along which they were walking would at any other moment have delighted her with its singular beauty. They were in a species of wild shrubbery allowed to grow in luxurious negligence and indulge the full exuberance of nature. Sturdy rhododendron bushes extended in glossy symmetrical mounds as far as the gravel. Between them, among ferns and grasses, a blue carpet of hyacinths spread away into the distance ; at her feet heavy-headed daffodils swayed and nodded gently ; laburnum and lilac trees, their brown branches tipped with little green points, overarched her head, and small drops of glistening dew fell as she brushed against the overhanging boughs, or touched the blades of wet grass with her skirts. Luce felt the beauty of the scene as one feels some person tapping outside a glass window that one can see without hearing any noise ; it was all beautiful, she knew it was beautiful—the budding spring, the early flowers with their bright colours, and the dewiness, and freshness, and sweetness, and yet it did not touch her. Dick walked on, angrily swishing his cane at the innocent daffodils, and she followed, breathlessly, feeling sorry for the poor pretty things.

‘And so you wish to be quit of me ? I understand ; perhaps I am not rich enough, or you believe all the nonsense you have heard, or you care for some one else.’

‘No, no,’ she panted.

‘If I thought—Luce, I shall never forgive you, never, never. I was a fool ; I fancied that you cared for me, really for me, not for my position, or my name, or—and you’re just like the others, you only think of yourself, you only consider your own happiness.’

‘Oh, Dick, indeed——’

‘Don’t explain anything, I don’t want to hear, I will marry Lady Fenchurch if you wish it. I dare say she will be pleasant and amiable enough ; she will have her own way in everything, but I shall never trust a woman again, never, never !’

He stopped breathless with anger.

‘Dick,’ she began soothingly, ‘please don’t imagine I am thinking of myself. I—oh, you know Dick what I feel.’

‘How can I tell what a girl feels ? Capricious, foolish, heartless creature.’

‘But don’t you see that our duty, yours and mine, is to Lady Fenchurch ?’

‘I don’t see it a bit, I don’t acknowledge any duty, I refuse to acknowledge anything but your wishes and our love.’

‘Our love ! Did not you always tell me you had only loved

Lady Fenchurch ; that I'—she pressed her hands against her bosom, and the big tears rained down—'was only to be a kind of companion, a sister, to please Granny ?'

'Oh well,' he said in a kinder tone, 'I dare say I did not mean all I said ; I was very sore about Lady Fenchurch then, but I see things more quietly now ; come, Luce, don't be a little fool, I always thought you *such* a sensible girl ; say you will marry me, and let us forget all this nonsense.'

Luce shook her head, the sobs were coming thick and fast, in another moment she would not be able to control them.

'What—you won't ? Oh yes, try to be a good little girl.'

Luce made an effort ; what must he think of her, offering to give him up, and crying like a baby as she did so ? Where was her philosophy, her firm resolve, her determined self-denial ?

'Dick, we had better not discuss the matter any more. My mind is made up.'

'And you won't marry me—you refuse—calmly intend to jilt me—is that your last word ?'

'I think you ought to give me up, and ask Lady Fenchurch to marry you.'

'And of course she will,' he said bitterly. 'Here's a nice state of things—to be saddled with a woman you don't want, and lose the woman you do. I declare I'm the most unlucky fellow in the world.'

'Dick, I am so sorry,' she said, stealing her hand into his with the confidence of a child.

'And it's your fault if I'm unhappy,' he said, dropping her hand with an angry jerk, 'all your fault ; you said you would take me in hand, that you cared for me ; and it was all going right, I felt so happy and so good as I came down here, thinking of you and all we were going to do—by Jove, I hadn't felt so good since I was a boy in knickerbockers and saved up my money to buy toffee, and now you've smashed up the whole thing ; if I go to the devil it's all your fault.'

Luce sighed. He heard the sigh and proceeded more glibly.

'But there, when women want to annoy one they can do it, trust them for that, first Lady Fenchurch and then you. Do you really mean all you have just said, or were you only trying me ?'

'I mean it.'

'Then good-bye, there is no use in wasting any more words about it.' He pulled out his watch and looked at it. 'I can just walk across the fields, and catch the next train back to town, while you explain the cause of my non-appearance to Lady Eleanor.'

‘Surely, Dick, you will not go like this ; Mr. Highview expected you.’

‘And I expected a very different welcome also, but you see I was mistaken, and he will have to bear his disappointment as best he can. Good-bye.’ He spoke roughly and turned to go, then seeing Luce’s imploring look he stopped and said, ‘Luce, on my solemn word of honour I’m sorry to leave you, shake hands with me and wish me luck. I’ve a kind of queer feeling that you can bring it if you choose.’

Luce put out her hand and looked at him with all the yearning love of her heart visible in her clear eyes ; he did not stay to look, but squeezed the hand she gave him passionately, then without another word he left her, standing alone and comfortless in the dewy path.

CHAPTER XLIII.

LADY ELEANOR IS VEXED.

THE hardest part of Luce’s task was not finished with that interview in the shrubbery. In moments of great mental tension there is a power that raises us above the level of ordinary emotion, the Lethe of excitement dulls the pain and renders us impervious to the suffering we are enduring. But when the friendly Lethe leaves us, when we see the full extent of the sacrifice, behold our life stripped of the love we willingly surrendered, are pricked by sneers or irritated by well-meaning comfort and advice, then indeed we realize the meaning of our loss. The sweet spring day, the brilliant sunshine growing warmer as the hours proceeded, the birds’ airy flight skimming low over the smooth shaven lawns, the merry capers and abrupt pauses of the little rabbits darting in and out, were loathsome to poor Luce ; never had the way home seemed so long, never had her steps lagged so wearily. It all had to be faced : the surprised look of the men-servants gathered to relieve Dick of his wraps and luggage as she entered alone, the kindly questioning of Mr. Highview in the library where the door stood open so that she could not pass unobserved, Lady Eleanor’s astonishment, her regret for the elaborate toilet she had unnecessarily made, mingled with anger for her niece’s folly, Maud’s evident amusement and undisguised contempt. Luce braved it all with a quiet unconcern that she herself wondered at. Though her heart felt fit to break and she was desperately longing to throw herself on some friendly bosom and weep out her sorrows, she

found strength to answer Lady Eleanor's torrent of inquiries, and to hold her own in the vindictive cross-examination.

'And he seemed pleased to see you and was very kind?' said Lady Eleanor in her iciest satirical voice.

'Yes, certainly, he was very kind.'

'And you actually broke off your engagement?'

'We agreed that it was best so.' Here Luce took her stand, and to all efforts to break through the defences of love, shame, and vanity only answered, 'It was best so.'

'And do you know, miss, what it means to be a jilted girl?' asked Lady Eleanor, magnificent in her rising wrath.

'I can guess.'

'No one will believe for a moment that *you* broke it off; girls never do those things; they will say he was tired of you, that you were deformed, or had bad health, or a bad temper.'

'I cannot help it.'

'Ungrateful minx!' and Lady Eleanor sailed from the room to overwhelm her husband with reproaches and lamentations.

Kind Mr. Highview was sorely distressed. He was tolerably ignorant of girls' natures, and could not tell how much they meant of what they said, but he felt pretty certain that Luce loved Dick, and that it caused her a pang to give him up. Personally he saw no necessity for her sacrificing herself to an abstract sense of duty, especially for a woman who had been *talked about*. Mr. Highview had all a respectable man's horror of a lady's tarnished reputation, but he could not refrain from according Luce, however grudgingly, a meed of respectful admiration. He knew his wife's persistency and her love of rule too well not to anticipate with dread on Luce's behalf the annoyances her conduct must necessarily entail. Like a man too, he endeavoured to explain away matters, to expostulate, and to soothe, and succeeded neither in allaying Lady Eleanor's wrath nor in materially assisting Luce. Such are the excellent but feeble natures that endeavour to stem revolutions with partial concessions, or throw themselves into the breach of parties with a pleasant observation or a text from the Bible. In an instant their frail interposition is brushed aside like the advances of an impertinent fly, and their advice promptly disregarded.

'But, my dear,' poor Mr. Highview suggested, 'you see it may be only a little misunderstanding, a lovers' quarrel. I am sure we had our lovers' quarrel, once upon a time, too.'

'I am sure *we* never had lovers' quarrels indeed, I never was a fool, if you were, Mr. Highview, and I tell you Luce has

broken her engagement, turned young Carrol off, given him his liberty.'

'He will return to her.'

'Will he? I doubt it. Freedom is too pleasant to a gay and rich young man for him to give it up lightly.'

'Well, at least it is better not to marry in haste and repent at leisure.'

'I am sure if women did not marry in haste they would never marry at all; men's nature shows itself in the worst light soon enough.'

'Shall I speak to Dick?' Mr. Highview was standing by his desk in the library, the sun shining on the top of his grey head and into his meek, blue eyes, which blinked to avoid the garish light.

'*You* speak to him—what can you do?'

'Well, not much, but I thought——'

'Men always will think wrong.'

'Sometimes a word——'

'Fudge. It will be horribly trying and awkward. Jilted by a man in one's own county, whom by superhuman exertions one had got into Parliament, and a good *parti* too, and Luce so dreadfully plain, and she stoops worse than ever; oh dear, oh dear! how shall I ever face all the gossiping, and the looks and the sneers? but men never feel for one, never, never!'

'I am sure no one can be more grieved, more disappointed than I am, but what is to be done?'

'Your niece deserves to be punished, and I hope she will be punished; the worst of it is she will punish us all, too.' Lady Eleanor sat down exhausted, and Mr. Highview continued to stand by the table, concerned and irresolute, wishing to help, and ignorant in what way he could render any services; foiled in his pleading, and fussy in his weak, anxious desire to do what was best.

'The long and the short of it is,' said Lady Eleanor, after a pause, 'that the girl is determined to ruin her whole life, to throw away a chance, and to annoy me, and I don't exactly see how it is to be helped. It is no use locking up a girl who does not care for society, and, as for starving her into submission, those things can't be done except in a novel.'

'Well, certainly I should not advise starving, one might knock off a little wine or sweetmeats—girls are fond of sweetmeats; what do you think? Wine could not matter, for all the doctors are mad on the temperance question.'

'That is child's play; besides, for aught we know, Dick Carrol

may consider himself fortunate—he was always rather wild and odd, and fond of betting and low company. That Mr. Bruce, now, was in my opinion a most dangerous adviser, a communist in an evening tie, and a very badly tied one, too.’

‘He was a student, and a quiet kind of young fellow, I think ; always kept his place, and seemed to listen attentively when I talked about the crops and the processes of agriculture ; got that from Virgil, you know : the Georgics—almost the only Latin I ever cared for.’

‘Bruce must be at the bottom of all this,’ said Lady Eleanor firmly. ‘He is a social agitator, and that sort of man is always intriguing ; they *must* intrigue, it is their bread and butter.’

‘Well, well, my dear, it is a bad business ; but perhaps you are right, women have a fine instinct—a deuced fine instinct, and yet they get so taken in by their lovers, I never could understand how it is.’

‘You need not worry your brains about those things I am sure ; you had better help me with your refractory niece.’

‘I will help you, Eleanor ; by this time you ought to know that I always do what I can to help you.’

Lady Eleanor pouted, as much as to say : ‘Oh, I dare say, we all know how little you can do,’ and swept from the room to talk the matter over with the more congenial and acuter Maud. Maud was surprised at the news of the broken engagement. She made a pretty shrewd guess at the depth of Luce’s affection for Dick, and she had never for an instant supposed that a girl, however silly she might be, would, to use her own racy parlance, ‘cut off her nose to spite her face ;’ she therefore easily surmised that there was more in the affair than she could fathom.

‘It is no use scolding or arguing,’ she said to Lady Eleanor, adding with a smile, ‘I know a little of womankind myself, and it is impossible to talk them into or out of love. I think with you that in a few days Luce will bitterly regret what she has done, and probably try all in her power to get Dick back.’

‘And, of course, he won’t come.’

‘There is the danger. You must try to be civil to Dick and keep on terms with him, and then there is no knowing what course events may take.’

‘To think that I should have to sit still and wait a girl’s good pleasure,’ sighed Lady Eleanor, ‘what is the world coming to ?’

‘It is deplorable,’ said Maud, secretly wondering whether, now he was free, it would be possible for her to make an impression on her cousin. She feared not. When a man has

acquired indifference, no dead volcano is more difficult to rouse. And there was Arthur Sterney, meanwhile, engrossed with his burlesque actresses, and her youth slipping away, and her chances of marriage diminishing every day. Oh! the folly of some girls, and the wisdom of others, and the inequalities of life! It made her bitter. Presently she said, 'Lady Eleanor, what do you think of change of scene?'

'Change of scene, my dear?'

'Yes, Luce has seen nothing of the world; she has not yet been presented. Why not give her a season in London? I am sure there is nothing to keep people in the country just now—shooting over, hunting in an expiring condition with March winds and a scarcity of foxes, and lawn tennis not yet begun—there is no hope for a girl here, and I am sure you must pine for society.'

'It is certainly dull, but Luce will be of no use in London, she is so absurdly shy, and we have no town house now, you know. Since we built Highview Castle, Mr. Highview pretends he cannot afford it.'

'You must coax him; he will do what you wish, I am sure.'

'Well, I believe I have some influence with him,' said Lady Eleanor consciously, settling her laces. She owned beautiful lace, inherited from her grandmother, and loved to display her knowledge of the differences between 'point d'Alençon,' 'point de Venise,' 'appliqué,' and 'point d'Espagne.'

'Of course no one manages better than you do. Now, Lady Eleanor, your only chance is to take a nice house in London, give dinner-parties, and cajole Dick back to your side.'

'I am sure I am quite willing, but to think that I must take all this trouble for some one else's child. Doesn't it show how necessary it is for everyone to have a family? Ah! Providence has not been bounteous to me, and yet I had such a fine figure when I married.'

'So you have now; I never saw such beautiful shoulders as yours in an evening gown.'

Lady Eleanor smiled. Certainly Maud would have suited her better than Luce. 'At any rate, Maud, you must take up your abode with us in London. Oh, I never could endure all the worry and the letter-writing unless I have you to help me; will you come?' Maud murmured something about 'my mother.' 'Don't you see, your mother can let her house, and visit among her friends; that will be such an economy.'

Maud saw her advantage. 'But the servants—our servants are so excellent, and so obliging—we could not afford to part with them, and what would become of them?'

‘You must let them with the house. Yes, indeed, it is often done ; Lady Pinchwell did it last year, and so did Mrs. Friskly.’

‘Mrs. Friskly—but then no servants ever stay with her more than a few months.’

‘At any rate you must manage it ; write to your mother at once, and say I desire it ; she will do anything for your advantage, I know. A most sensible, easy-going woman is your mother.’

Maud laughed. The impressions we convey to our friends are sometimes so strangely different from our real personalities. Maud knew her mother so thoroughly, her worldliness, her selfishness, her love of petty shifts ; sensible she was certainly, with regard to seizing every scrap of material advantage, but hardly sensible in the usual acceptation of the word. However, she promised Lady Eleanor to carry out her injunctions, and volunteered to write to some house agents in London, explaining Lady Eleanor’s requirements, and impressing upon them that the house in question must be large, commodious, clean, airy, warranted in a sanitary condition, and to be obtained at a low and reasonable rate.

Mr. Highview consented easily enough to his wife’s demands ; he had been thoroughly bothered and wearied by the election, and saddened by Luce’s quiet ways and pale face. He agreed that a change would be good for everybody, and mentally hoped that in town the women would give him a little peace.

CHAPTER XLIV

A PRETTY WIDOW.

It was some weeks after these events that Lady Fenchurch was, one day, lying on her sofa and gazing listlessly out at the tender green of the trees in the garden and park. The air was soft and balmy, filled with the gentle languor that seems to precede the more violent heats of summer, and delicately scented by the fragrant shrubs which only lately had burst into the full beauty of their blossom. It was the very day for a convalescent—bright, but not dazzling ; quiet, yet not enervating. Lady Fenchurch enjoyed the weather in her languid fashion, for she was a convalescent. The nervous illness from which she had suffered since Sir Hilary’s death left her weak and unstrung ; a trifle startled her, a rough word set her heart beating. She was as weak as a child, and nearly as gentle. All the impetuosity and rebellion had been knocked out of her by pain and sleeplessness, and Miss Fenchurch’s excellent, though somewhat

prosaic and commonplace, nursing earned her a full debt of gratitude. It was so delicious to be well again, to feel no pain, only a pleasing exhaustion, to be surrounded by sweet scents and agreeable sights, and to find nothing expected of her. Miss Fenchurch relieved her of all cares and troubles; drilled the servants, and visited the smallest breach of conduct so severely that the men seemed to walk on velvet, and the maids to handle the cups and saucers as though they were wadding. No banging doors disturbed the silence, no crashing of crockery irritated the nerves—all was silent, peaceful, and calm. Evelyn said little, but her grateful eyes reassured Miss Fenchurch as to her feelings. The good old maid wiped away a furtive tear on the first occasion that her pale and feeble patient smiled, for the love and attention that had once been her brother's due she now transferred to his widow. Miss Fenchurch was like a dog who attaches himself to the quondam master of the house, whoever he may be, and her days had been passed uncomplainingly by Evelyn's bedside, in a darkened chamber, for noise and light equally displeased the morbidly sensitive nerves of the sufferer. When the mechanical jingling of her beloved knitting-needles irritated Evelyn, Miss Fenchurch uncomplainingly laid them aside for the first time for forty years, and resigned herself to the penance of inaction. It was, therefore, with almost a mother's joy that the good lady watched her charge's gradual recovery, doubled the daily dose of wine, and increased the luncheon from one cutlet to two, partaken of with proportionate appetite. The knitting-needles were resumed, though oftener an amusing book was read aloud; and Miss Fenchurch so far relaxed her vigilance as to permit herself a daily walk round the kitchen-garden, and even, after strict injunctions to the maid not to lose sight of her mistress for one single instant, to sally down to the farm and inquire why the butter was not nearly as yellow as usual. During one of these absences she had driven into West Thorpe and ordered the prettiest and most fashionable mourning possible, the very mourning which had roused Lady Eleanor's sarcasm, and in thus departing from her usual contempt for dress Miss Fenchurch offered a kind of sacrificial atonement for any sins of deed and speech which might have annoyed Evelyn. And she succeeded. Lady Fenchurch was now meek and grateful, and sincerely attached to her sister-in-law. Gradually a new life returned to her, and with it a new spirit. She lay for hours motionless in her soft white tea-gown, her beautiful black eyes, liquid with gentle emotion, set wide open, thinking. Her brief married life, Sir Hilary's rage, his

suspicious, his awfully sudden death, her own folly and recklessness, appeared like a dream. She was young, she was beautiful, she was free, and she stretched eagerly all the tendrils of her being towards life. It had become so precious, so valuable, life alone without conditions ; the mere breathing of the air, the looking at the welcome sunshine as it slowly passed from one side of the room to the other, with ever-varied effects of beauty, from pearly dawn to rosy sunset ; the vivid tints of the tulips in the glasses on the table, the red melting into yellow, and yet quite distinct ; the crystalline purity and exquisite scent of the narcissus, the drooping lily of the valley hiding among the fresh green leaves, delighted and enchanted her. She felt no sorrow for Sir Hilary, no grief for his loss ; he had been a fraction, and none too pleasant a fraction, of her former existence ; but in this new life of emotion and sentiment he had no part. She supposed she was rich, she supposed the old house and the good furniture and the dainty boudoir fittings were hers ; she never thought about it ; it seemed natural and right to her, and she recked no more whence her many comforts came, nor of the person who provided her with the luxuries her caprice desired, than does the child inquire whether the scullery-maid's wages be paid, or its father's rents come in regularly. Miss Fenchurch never told her. Miss Fenchurch, to whom all the luxury and the riches belonged, fed her and nursed her, and waited upon her with the attention of a devoted servant. The old maid could scarcely have explained her own feelings. She required something to pet, to manage, and provide for. Evelyn, in her helplessness, was that something, and afforded scope for Miss Fenchurch's love of housekeeping, and pride in her good housewifely skill. She did not care for riches in themselves ; her tastes were too limited, her aspirations bounded by the quiet home-life. But she could not abide a speck of dust on the furniture, or a little tarnish on the polished grates, or a silver dish the less on the dinner-table. She would have everything done, as she expressed it, properly, and all these cares fully employed her time. Miss Fenchurch was the man's ideal woman *par excellence* ; she knitted indefatigably, and made the ordering of dinner an elaborate study. It teased her, too, that Evelyn remained perfectly indifferent to the lightness of a *soufflé* or the golden browning of a fried sole, that in the early days of her illness she declined the most inviting dainties, and when she grew stronger, with the return of a healthy appetite, would eat anything indifferently, from a bit of fried bacon to a slice of roast mutton ; but she comforted herself by thinking that,

though unappreciated, the succulent dishes of her *cuisine* were at least unapproachable. Miss Fenchurch always drilled her cooks ; they began as the eldest girl in the school to learn the duties of the scullery-maid, and gradually worked their way upward to fat and comfortable mistresses of the art of cookery. To-day, profiting by the sunshine and the brilliancy of the weather, she had gone to the farm to give instructions about the slaying of a sucking-pig, for the roasting of which her cook was now famous, and thus Evelyn lay alone on her sofa, basking languidly, and enjoying the genial warmth. She had reached that state of convalescence most approaching childhood, when the animal and sensorial powers far exceed the intellectual. She enjoyed the mere fact of existence, but she wanted nothing beyond. Her thoughts were bounded by a vague wondering if Miss Fenchurch would be home to tea, and a gentle surmise as to the ending of the last new novel that lay beside her. The lovers had just been parted sharply and unaccountably, as happens in story-books, and she surmised with none too eager an interest that they would come together again in the third volume in satisfactory fashion. As though the spring sunshine had induced thoughts of love, and with them the visible presence of a lover, the door opened, and the servant inquired in a low and studiously impressive tone, whether her ladyship would receive Mr. Carrol. Lady Fenchurch had as yet received no visitors, and lying there in her loose, cream-coloured robe, could not be considered attired in orthodox widow's mourning. The servant, with the quick instinct of a lackey trained in good families, perceived this, and only the urgent insistence of the young man, and the furtive sight of a piece of gold in his hand, induced him to deliver the message. Evelyn blushed deeply. She half rose and said, 'No ; I can see no one.' Then, with the newly awakened appetite for change and variety and pleasing gossip, she altered her mind, and said, 'Yes.'

The servant, without moving a muscle of his imperturbable countenance, withdrew, and speedily admitted the visitor.

For an instant neither spoke. Evelyn was oppressed with the recollection of past events ; her husband's anger and suspicion suddenly rose vividly to her mind ; her hand trembled, and her lips quivered. Dick, sternly resolved on carrying out Luce's wishes, came prepared to be cold and matter-of-fact, but the vision of a beautiful woman in cool white garments, when he had expected to see a tearful widow in the unbecoming black which fashion has imposed on them, lest even in hours of grief their vanity should seize the upper

hand, changed the current of his thoughts, and turned indifference into admiration. After a while he recovered himself sufficiently to say :

‘ You have been ill ?’

‘ Yes, did you not know ? I have been very ill.’

‘ Of course—the shock——’ and then he paused, while she gave a slight shudder.

‘ Yes, it is horrid to be a widow. I hate black.’

‘ I see you do not wear it.’

‘ But I shall be obliged to when I am well. You, too, are in mourning,’ she said, glancing at the band on his hat.

‘ Yes, my poor grandmother died at the time of the election.’

‘ And now you are rich—and happy.’ She said this listlessly. His happiness and prosperity scarcely seemed to interest her. Dick felt piqued. We think our own affairs so all-important to others.

‘ Yes, I am rich and—and free.’

‘ You are going to be married ?’

‘ No ; and this is why I came to see you to-day, when, perhaps, you might think it almost presumptuous in me to force my way in.’

‘ I am glad to see you.’

‘ You are aware of your own sad position, no doubt, and that emboldens me.’

‘ My position ?’

‘ It was not my fault if circumstances were against me ; if people talked and told untruths, and if you are poor. I swear to you, Lady Fenchurch, that I never for an instant thought——’

‘ You are speaking Greek to me. I cannot understand.’ She put up her hand to her head wearily ; it was silly of her to receive visitors ; she was certainly not strong enough for the effort.

‘ You don’t know, then ?’

‘ Know what ?’

‘ Well’—he began to stammer, evidently his action was premature—‘ about the will.’

‘ Don’t stammer, please—pray speak out—I hate mysteries.’

‘ Have you not seen the will ?’

‘ What will ?’

‘ Sir Hilary’s.’

‘ No—why should I ? I told you my head was not strong. I suppose it is like any other will—he left all to me, I believe.’

‘ You are mistaken—the entailed estates go to a distant cousin, and the personalty and jewels and a large income to——’

‘ Me, of course,’ she said complacently.

‘To his sister.’

‘His sister ! Then what is mine ?’

‘Nothing, absolutely nothing ; a pittance of £400 a year.’

‘How shameful !’ Evelyn had no practical idea of the value of £400 a year ; she was absolutely ignorant as to whether one could keep a carriage and horses on it, or if it would provide a good cook, but she did realize that such a sum meant comparatively poverty.

‘It is shameful ; and then do you see, Evelyn,’ he bent towards her, ‘people have said cruel things of you, and—do you not wish to hear?—’

‘Go on ! I can bear it all,’ she said, paling exceedingly. ‘I suppose, if this is so, I can bear it.’

‘And they have coupled our names together, yours and mine, and so—and so I came to say that I am at your service.’

‘Thank you, I dare say I can manage.’

‘But your character ?’

‘Who can say anything about it, and what do I care ?’

‘You are so poor, and people will not be kind to you.’

‘Rachel will let me live with her ; I can stay here always.’

‘This place is only hers for a year ; after that it goes away to the heir, and you will be absolutely dependent upon her : £400 a year will scarcely keep you and your maid.’

Evelyn stared blankly before her ; why had he come in on this bright spring day, when she felt so contented and so happy, to annoy and distress her, and shatter her peace ?

‘Dear, I am come to say—had we not better brave these things together ? I am rich, and with me by your side no one can say anything. I wanted to make you understand this soon, before you began to fret ; and when your mourning is over—whenever you like—we can be married.’ Dick would not have spoken with the energy and generosity he now showed had Evelyn been one whit less beautiful or attractive, and had he not felt in her presence a spark of the old love revive. She was a charming and lovely widow, and at any rate he need never be ashamed of her appearance. She did not speak ; he waited, but she did not speak ; and lay against her cushions as white as the gown she wore.

Presently two large tears oozed from her eyes, and rolled slowly down her cheeks.

‘Should you be unhappy with me, Evelyn ?’

‘Oh ! I don’t know, it is all so dreadful ; why did I ever meet you ? you have brought nothing but misery into my life.’

When a man has just offered his hand to a woman in a fit of

generosity, it is scarcely pleasant to be thus received. Dick clutched his hat and made as though he would go.

‘No, no, I did not mean it,’ she said hurriedly, ‘of course I cannot mean it, only you have made me so unhappy.’

‘In a few months,’ he said, timidly touching her hands with his fingers, ‘when your mourning is over, we can go abroad a little, and you will forget.’

‘I suppose I shall,’ she answered with an accent of indolent despair. ‘I dare say you are right.’

The wooing was certainly not very satisfactory; Dick’s success could scarcely be said to lie in love, but Evelyn was beautiful, and Luce had said it was his duty. Spite of all, the thought of her, and of what she desired, formed the motive part of his conduct.

‘Then it is settled, we are engaged.’ She bowed her head, and he printed a passionless kiss on her white forehead. ‘I shall not call again, it is better not; I must guard your reputation now, it is my care.’

‘Ah! what does a woman not endure for the sake of her reputation?’ said Evelyn wearily, turning a little away from him.

‘I am not disagreeable to you surely?’ he said in a tone of pained surprise, ‘remember you are quite free, you must please yourself.’

‘Oh no, you are very kind, and I am not well, and besides you know I cannot be gay, I am in mourning.’

‘I quite understand; you might write to me occasionally and look upon me as your friend, and if you wish to see me I will come, but not otherwise; we must be careful, only now you know you are neither defenceless nor dependent.’ He rose and lingered a little as if he expected some warmer response, but she only said, ‘Thank you. I will not forget, and I will write to you—of course I may tell Rachel?’

‘Of course, but we had better keep it a secret from everyone else, people would say it was too soon.’

‘Yes. Are you at Long Leam?’

‘For a few days only. My uncle and aunt are still there. What is a bachelor to do in a big house by himself?’

‘I can’t imagine,’ she said indifferently. Then, as the pause became embarrassing, he bowed, and left the room. The strange wooing was scarcely over when Miss Fenchurch returned brimful of news about the sucking-pig.

‘Such a beauty, my dear, and Mrs. Hodges says it was the finest litter we have had this year. I do hope you will have appetite enough to eat it; the cook’s stuffing is always good,

and apples are still plentiful, though it is late for them. You look pale ; now I dare say you've never taken your quinine, I will ring for it at once; and there's a dreadful draft from that window, you should have put on a shawl.'

CHAPTER XLV

BRUCE HAS A DREAM.

BRUCE, when for an instant he allowed his thoughts to stray away from the great work which was now nearing something like completion (the first volume being finished, and the last proof-sheets just passing through the press), sometimes thought of the strangely pleasant time he had spent at Highview, and of the pale girl with the large brown eyes, in whose company he had passed many hours. She was so different to her surroundings : so still, and so introspective—qualities which he had not hitherto found characteristic of the fashionable world—that he often wondered what her life was, and her feelings. It sometimes occurred to him as singular that she should have engaged herself to Dick, but he rapidly dismissed this thought with the reflection that no doubt girls in her position were brought up to look upon marriage as a purely business relation, and the choice of a husband as a commercial affair. Still it grated upon his feelings. Luce had appeared to him so thoroughly womanly, so feminine in her words and movements, so formed for a deep attachment, even for passion, that he could not help fancying she would suffer in a *mariage de convenance*. The glimpse of idle life he had caught at Highview scarcely impressed him with a sense of pleasure ; fine dinners and a show of gold plate wearied him, while the beauty of their dress, and the sprightliness of their manners, rather heightened the effect of the vapidness of great people. In the library, however, neglected and undisturbed, he had been very happy ; very happy also in his fireside talks with Luce. For the first time in his life, he associated on terms of familiar equality, aided by an already acquired friendliness due to Dick's praises, with a charming woman of a refined and cultivated mind. The only two other women he habitually saw, his landlady and his own mother, could not be said to stand in this kind of relation to him ; a mother, whatever her peculiarities, is always one's mother, and therefore sacred, and a landlady of the gushing order is preferably kept at a distance ; therefore the free and gentle interchange of sentiments and opinions he had

enjoyed with Luce, bore a doubly precious meaning. Bruce scarcely realized it at the time ; he fancied the sole privilege he enjoyed at Highview was the run of the library, and the unique opportunity of studying some old fifteenth-century manuscripts, black-letter type, and L'Estoile's 'Journals of Henry III. and Henry IV.' ; but when he returned to his lonely lodging, his work, and his brightly burning, if somewhat unpleasantly smelling, student's lamp, he missed something ; and only after days of discomfort and uneasiness did he realize that that something was a woman's face. Once even he leant back in his chair, interrupting a vivid description of Anglo-Saxon manners he was writing, to weave a day-dream. The dream of a gentle voice by his side, a sweet face at his elbow, ready to assist and encourage ; overcoming difficulties with a smile, and clearing away despondencies by a laugh ; then, when the work was finished, and put away for the nonce, of a pair of loving arms wrapped about his weary shoulders, and of words of love murmured in his ear. It was for this, no doubt, that he had lived a life of solitude, endured long hours of silent monotony, toiled and suffered alone. He crossed his arms, and a smile played about his mouth. Woman's love, the crown and glory of life, the ideal beauty of all things, the passage of an angel's wings on earth ! People said that passion weakened a man ; that to be strong it was necessary to stand alone. He felt this as a fallacy : union was strength, and love was nothing if not a fusion of human lives. He pleased himself occasionally with these musings. The woman's face was always Luce, the woman's voice always her soft contralto. He had kept aloof so long from the ephemeral and sensual passions that beset men, that he was the veriest tyro in matters of love, but for that very reason, perhaps, better qualified to taste and appreciate. But, though the woman of whom he dreamt bore the presentment of the only girl he had known well, yet he never for one single instant thought of her as owning a personal relation to him, even before he heard of her engagement ; and, naturally, afterwards such a thing became impossible. He only dwelt upon her image as the poet and the artist revels in picture-galleries or among splendid works of sculpture which do not belong to him, in which he has no actual part, but yet which he makes his own by right of sympathy and æsthetic comprehension. Immersed in his studies, he had heard nothing of the Highview establishment since the election—indeed, had seen but little of Luce at that time ; and his surprise was only equalled by his sympathy when Dick informed him of the abrupt termination to his engagement.

'She wished you to be free ; she gave you no reason ?' he said meditatively, scratching with his pen on the blotting-paper.

'Yes ; she gave a reason—a woman's reason.' Dick stretched himself on the narrow sofa, his heels in the air. 'Said I had compromised somebody else, and so must marry that somebody. A stupid solution, if ever there was one.'

'Miss Windermere is usually reasonable.'

'So I always thought ; she was firm enough, obstinate enough, in all conscience, but she was certainly not reasonable.'

'It is strange.'

'She never thought of my feelings, though she pretended to love me. It is no more pleasant for a man than for a woman to be jilted ; one feels such a fool. Besides, what am I to do in a big house by myself ? And I could not stand those Vincents.'

'But in giving you your freedom I suppose she thought she was acting rightly ?'

'I suppose she did. Women are so extraordinary.'

'You will carry out her wishes ?'

'Deuce take me if I wish to carry out anybody's wishes but my own, and look round a little. I've been so worried.'

'And what will become of Miss Windermere ?'

'How can I tell ? She'll marry some other fellow, I suppose, or become an old maid. It's her own doing entirely.'

Bruce thought for a moment, leaning his head on his hand. Presently he said :

'Yes ; women *are* extraordinary. It passes my comprehension how, in life, one seems to come quite close to people, to breathe the same air, to think the same thoughts, to partake of their very nature, and then to drift away apart as if one had never met, or seen, or loved the one person who, for a short time, has been everything in the world to one, dearer and closer than heart had ever conceived. Once you loved Lady Fenchurch in this fashion.'

'But she deceived me—she led me on and treated me like a boy—no man can stand that.'

'And then came Miss Windermere.'

'I never pretended to love her.'

'And you meant to marry, not loving ? What a fatal, what a terrible mistake !'

'I don't know ; she suited me very well, she understood me fairly, she did not rub me up or reproach me—no man of spirit can stand reproaches—she gave me my *congé* very nicely too.'

'Would you be suprised to learn that, in doing her duty as she believed it, she did violence to her own feelings; no woman parts quietly with a man unless she loves him still; one does not parley with a ferocious beast, but one lets a dove flutter and fly and return to the hand that fed it.'

'Thank you for the simile, a ferocious wild beast. I've certainly no luck with women.'

'Possibly the women believe they have no luck with you.'

'Luce was a fool. I should have made a remarkably kind husband.'

'And run after every other pretty woman that came in your way.'

'Don't imagine that the privilege of friendship gives you the right to lecture. I object to personal observations.'

'Seriously, Dick, I'm sorry for this *contretemps*, but Miss Windermere is an intelligent girl. If she advised you to give her up and to return to your old love it was no doubt because she saw the wisdom of the proceeding.'

Dick bit his moustache.

'I declare I think I shall marry no one; and yet to live in a big house by one's self is horrid; I hate solitude and coming home to find one's fire out and not a soul to speak to.'

'Oh, you had much better marry,' said Bruce, from among his folios. 'And a widow may possibly be equal to restraining your impetuosity.'

'I wish you wouldn't talk like that—impetuosity indeed—but it's early days to talk of a widow. She is scarcely out of her first mourning.'

'A widow's mourning is like a girl's coyness—put on to allure.'

'I declare you are growing cynical.'

'The effect of these barbaric old Anglo-Saxons upon a weary brain, I suppose. And so you don't regret Miss Windemere?'

'Regret! I'm thoroughly disgusted.'

'But you're not breaking your heart?'

'Breaking my heart, no. I very nearly did that once.'

'And you've bought your experience; come, you see you're getting on—in your next love affair you won't move a muscle. Practice makes perfect.'

'You are intolerable. I shall go out.'

'Do. Smoke a cigarette, chew a toothpick, and go to lunch with some pretty little girl; by tea-time you will have forgotten Miss Windermere's very existence, and be quite ready for another affair.'

Dick disdained to answer, clapped his hat on his head, and

left the room, slamming the door. Bruce buried his face in his hands and heaved something like a sigh.

‘He does not regret her ; a girl who is far too good for him, who is breaking her own heart while she tries to heal another’s ; a girl who has feeling and sense, and modesty and a *heart*—and all this thrown away on a fatuous idiot who talks of marrying because he is lonely in a big house—lonely indeed !—he can drink, and smoke, and play billiards, and what will she do ? I can see her with her soft brown eyes full of tears, and her voice like a summer wind, telling him not to think of her. Ah ! I have no patience, the idiots, the idiots there are, and I myself am the greatest idiot of all. What is it to me ? *He* will marry the widow, and they will have plenty of money, and give dinners, and bring up a large family of sportsmen and dancing, flirting women, and *she* will find some one else to her taste, a coronet perhaps, or some great squire, and one day I shall see her face at the opera, with a sweet little child by her side, or meet her driving calm and unruffled in the Park, and neither he nor she will ever remember.’ He clenched his hands angrily, and his pale cheek grew paler. His friends, the few he cared to see, said he worked too much ; his long fingers grew transparent, one could see the veins through them, and he stooped more, and his cheeks grew haggard. A pretty fellow he to think of women and to dream of love. He said to himself angrily that he didn’t dream of love, but that as a philosopher he had a perfect right to note and classify the various phases of human folly. There was a girl now, cultivated, modest, gentle, high-minded, giving up the man she loved (Bruce made a shrewd guess at the state of her feelings) for an idea of honour which few men would have heeded. There was honour then in women ; they were not all ‘at heart a rake,’ not all mercenary and worldly in her rank of life. The study of a woman’s heart was as much a study as any other—it represented a type, and had a decided ethical purpose. How much of the individual could be traced to the inherited prejudices of progenitors, how much to habit, how much to education, and what was left to the individual when all these various influences were removed and discarded ? Would the consciousness of right-doing support her in her sacrifice, or would her woman’s feebleness and yearning for affection cause her to suffer ? Which would suffer most, she in her trampling down of natural feeling for an impossible ideal, he in his future disillusion ? Bruce tried to argue out these thoughts like a metaphysical problem : he endeavoured to frame them in abstract form,

and all the while he felt that the girl was right, far more right than he had ever conceived possible. He turned with assiduous ardour to his notes, his authorities, his manuscripts, and tried to drown his newly awakened interest in the present by an increased absorption in the past; but the black-letter swam before his eyes, the Anglo-Saxon flowed into modern English; the old dry bones clothed themselves in flesh and blood, the ancient forms and expressions changed into modern commonplace, and always a girl's voice disturbed his labours and a girl's eyes looked through the crabbed writing of the musty papers. 'I am ill,' he said to himself, rising abruptly; 'too much learning hath made thee mad. I must buy a bicycle and join the ranks of happy shop-boys careering on a Saturday half-holiday into the country. It is the spring coming on, my room is stifling, and there is a thrush singing in the tree outside my window.

Dick did not call again for some time, and Bruce was glad of it. He did not wish to hear more of his friend's love affairs, they were annoying and interrupting to a man engaged in a great work. Dick's sphere and his were not the same. He had always held it as a mistake for people to try and lift themselves out of the class in which they were born; he was one of the people, he was proud of it, the dominion of the intelligence was well understood to be greater than the power of wealth and rank. He could not imagine anyone priding himself on birth, for birth is an accident, while merit is a claim. He should claim his due some day, but it would not be in idle and fashionable society.

CHAPTER XLVI.

BRUCE TAKES A LITTLE RECREATION.

A FEW days later, Bruce was walking down one of the tolerably quiet streets leading out of Oxford Street. He had been to fetch a book from the London Library, and was returning to his lodgings to digest it at his leisure. Absorbed in thought of the intellectual treat in store for him, he strode along, as was his wont, with head bent down, and meditative eyes fixed on the ground. Suddenly a smart victoria, with a pair of splashing horses and a couple of supercilious, well-dressed servants on the box, pulled up beside the pavement. Startled, he lifted his eyes and saw Lady Eleanor, smiling and well-dressed, beckoning to him, and Luce by her side. At first he thought it a mistake. So fashionable a lady could have nothing to say to a poor student, shabbily dressed, and carrying a book under

his arm. He knew his position, he did not mean to transgress it ; a business visit in company of the man he was coaching in political matters constituted no title to social intimacy, when all the conditions were reversed. He paused, and glanced round to observe if there were no one else in sight for whom the greeting was designed. No ; only a young dressmaker, hurrying along with a parcel, and two working-men, carrying tools, were in sight. Lady Eleanor waved her hand again, and presently the powdered footman approached and said her ladyship wished to speak with him.

Bruce advanced to the carriage.

‘Really, Mr. Bruce,’ said her ladyship, in her most affable manner, ‘we have had so much trouble to attract your attention, I positively thought you did not wish to acknowledge us.’

Bruce bowed.

‘Your ladyship could scarcely believe that ; but I was in doubt whether your greeting was intended for me.’

‘Of course. We nodded and waved our hands violently, didn’t we, Luce ? Not that you ever do anything violently, you’re too indifferent.’ This in an undertone, which, however, Bruce, whose faculties were quickened, heard distinctly.

He thought Luce paler than ever, and there were certainly dark rings under her eyes, which told of pain or sleeplessness ; but she gave him one of her sweetest and most encouraging smiles. After that, he prepared to listen attentively to Lady Eleanor’s garrulousness.

‘We have been in town some time ; you must come and see us. Eaton Square, you know. I always like a square, because it is quiet, and one can breathe. I suppose you are in town ?’

‘I am always in town.’

‘Then we shall expect you. Sunday is the best time to find us in ; every other day there is something going on ; and now there’s Hurlingham on Saturday. I am really tired to death of all the whirl and the tea-parties. These afternoons with music are most tedious ; but what can one do ? one must behave like everyone else, or one is soon left behind.’

‘It must be fatiguing.’

Bruce spoke to Lady Eleanor, but he looked steadfastly at Luce, who sat there so quiet and silent, a kind of impassive, veiled prophet, in the volatile rattle and business of her fashionable aunt.

‘Fatiguing ? I should think so. It’s simply killing ! Do you ever go to parties ?’—‘Never.’

‘Never ? Fancy living in London without going to parties.

One might as well be buried in the ruins of Pompeii, and see skeletons and petrified bread all round one. Then there's art, too; one owes so much to that—the Grosvenor and the Academy and the Water-colour Institute. I go to all the private views, and all the first nights at the theatre; and I attend sales of china and old prints and pictures. I am a great collector, you know——'

Here Lady Eleanor paused for breath.

'I remember your ladyship had a number of beautiful things at Highview Castle.'

'I should think so. I have quite as good china as the Rothschilds; and I'm always picking up bargains. Now, only the other day——'

'And does Miss Windermere enjoy all this gaiety very much?' said Bruce, uncourteously interrupting Lady Eleanor's effusion.

His question immediately set her off on another subject, and she answered for her niece.

'It's her first season, you know. Oh yes, all girls like going out, though Luce is very quiet about everything; but she enjoys it, don't you, Luce?'

'Very much, aunt,' answered Luce gently, with a droop of her eyelids.

'I imagine a season in London is something like a man's first campaign; it brings out all the qualities and capacities of his nature.'

'It brings out everyone's temper. You wouldn't believe what a trial servants are now, especially in the season, when one requires such attention.'

'Of course,' said Bruce, absently watching Luce's little gloved hands, which moved nervously.

'By-the-bye,' said Lady Eleanor, with that easy adaptability to change which is the characteristic of fashionable society, 'have you seen anything of your friend Mr. Carrol? We have not set eyes on him lately. How is he, do you know? Immersed in politics, I suppose? I wonder if he is going to vote for woman suffrage.'

Luce blushed a rosy red; she could not help it. Bruce's eyes seemed to look her through and through, and to note each varying emotion of her poor little heart. He discreetly removed his gaze from her now, however; he hated to see the child blush, and involuntarily reveal her sorrow and her suffering.

Lady Eleanor saw that he was not attending to her discourse, and became impatient. She always liked to be first in every man's consideration.

'Have you seen Mr. Carrol?' she asked tartly.

Bruce, suddenly recalled to reason, blurted out an incoherent answer, that Dick was in town, he believed, and very busy with the House; but that he didn't exactly know what he was doing.

'Very well, then, don't forget your promise; come and see us soon, and tell us about him—on Sunday, you know.'

She signed to the servant to drive on, and Luce moved her lips as if to say farewell, but no sound escaped them.

'And that girl loved him,' Bruce muttered to himself, as he stood on the pavement watching the carriage drive off; then he shifted his book to the other arm, and walked away.

The lodgings seemed stuffier and dingier than ever when he returned. Mrs. Flinks and her smiles and ogles, and even her boxes of stocks and mignonette in the window emitting a fragrant odour, in which the widow's soul delighted, vexed and irritated him.

He climbed to his lonely room, and threw himself on the sofa.

'Shall I visit them?' he thought; and then the sense of equality, which lies dormant in the breast of every Englishman, rose up within him, and he said, 'Yes—why not? I am their equal in brains, in knowledge, in capacity.'

But he was not their equal in riches and position, and he was too wise not to know this, and to feel how heavily the want of these things handicapped him. Notwithstanding, after a few days, he decided to avail himself of Lady Eleanor's invitation and to call in Eaton Square on the following Sunday. Lady Eleanor herself, very properly, cared nothing about the penniless student (if people were born poor, it was their misfortune; she could not be expected to redress the inequalities of fortune), but she still fondly hoped for Dick's return, and she believed that in attracting Bruce to her house she was cultivating a bond of union between her and the recreant lover. Bruce was certain to talk to Dick of his visit (probably he seldom had a chance of calling on titled ladies living in Eaton Square); might kindle by his enthusiastic descriptions the dwindling flame of love; might create a desire in Dick to see again the girl he had so nearly married.

All this, in the flash of inspiration, passed through Lady Eleanor's brain when she stopped the carriage to speak to Bruce: a condescension she would not otherwise have been guilty of, and she determined to be extremely gracious to the student, and to encourage his visits; arguing, that with so unworldly and inexperienced a person it would not be difficult to obtain some influence, and to mould him to her wishes.

Bruce had taken extra pains with his toilet on the occasion of this visit ; lank and ungraceful he could not help appearing, but his long white hands with the filbert-shaped nails, his quiet, refined manner, and high intelligent forehead, procured for him, at least, a certain amount of distinction. He was a man you could not help noticing, and, except perhaps to some very young and silly girl, he would prove more interesting than the cloud of ordinary mashers, with their chokingly tight collars and groom-like habiliments. Lady Eleanor smiled graciously upon him when he entered her stately drawing-room, set out with all the bric-a-brac she was insatiable in buying, but after a word or two waved him off with vague amiability, while she addressed some other more elegantly attired guest. Bruce drifted away a little into a corner, rather helplessly wondering what he should do next, when Luce's soft voice desired him to come and sit beside her. She made one of a knot of girls and men talking and laughing, amongst whom Bruce recognised Maud Hardfast and Arthur Sterney. Maud greeted him in her bold, hearty fashion.

'Fancy you here, Mr. Bruce. I thought you never stirred from your books.'

'Not often, I confess, but, on Sunday, even I require a little relaxation.'

'It is too hot to exert one's self,' sighed Maud, leaning gracefully back in her chair (ill-natured people declared she studied every one of these idle, careless poses before the looking-glass). 'I declare it's the hottest June I ever remember.'

'I delight in warm weather,' said Luce.

'I shouldn't think those wretched men who have to sit up all night in the House appreciate it much' put in Maud viciously. 'I declare, when one comes home from a ball, tired out, and sees that light burning, and remembers that those poor creatures are still at it, squabbling over a cattle disease bill, or sparring with a tiresome Government official, and obliged to sit there all the time, whether they like it or not, it gives one the shudders. I am so glad I am not a man, and especially not an M.P., aren't you, Mr. Bruce?'

'Well, you see, I am not a fair judge. I *am* a man, though not an M.P.'

'Of course, that is what I meant. And how is your friend, Dick Carrol? I always promised him I would go and hear his first speech in the House, and, of course, I never did,' she said, turning round with a laugh to attract Arthur Sterney's approbation.

'I believe Carrol is doing very well, and takes a great interest in politics, but I have not seen him lately.'

'Not seen him lately?' asked Maud curiously; 'have you two quarrelled, then? You used to be like a pair of twins, or Orestes and Pylades, those two absurd friends one reads about in the schoolroom.'

Luce lent a little forward listening.

Bruce said in a grave voice, 'I do not generally quarrel, but when one is very busy—one has less time to spare for the claims of friendship. Cannot you imagine two people meeting only rarely, and yet taking up their intimacy exactly at the point they left off whenever they do meet?'

'No, I can't. I forget people if I don't see them constantly. Most women do—I think.'

'Is that your opinion, Miss Windermere?' said Bruce, turning to her with a suppressed light in his eye.

'I don't know, I am sure. I think it is difficult to forget.'

'There's one thing, duns never forget,' laughed Arthur Sterney; 'my bootmaker sends me in his bill every month, and I regularly file it. I assure you I am most business-like.'

'But you are very extravagant,' said Maud, looking at him tenderly through her half-closed lids.

'I hate a screw,' said the young guardsman. 'I know fellows who would rather buy a sixpenny button-hole than go without. I am quite different; the best of everything is good enough for me, and I never wear anything but a gardenia or a clove carnation; everything else is only fit for cads.'

'I wonder what a man's flower-bill comes to, and his cigars, at the end of the year!' mused Maud; 'I expect it would pay for a good many of our dresses.'

'Do you ever wear sixpenny flowers?' asked Sterney of Bruce, who was listening with a smile of amusement.

'Never!' responded the latter. 'I can't bear anything of inferior quality; if I haven't a gardenia, I go without.'

'Quite right,' said the guardsman, on whom the implied sarcasm was totally wasted.

Lady Eleanor now approached. 'Mrs. Straightly wants us to go down to Eton on the 4th of June,' she said to Maud; 'what do you think—can we manage it?'

'Oh, pray do,' urged Mrs. Straightly, a smart-dressed matron with unwarrantably golden hair. 'I promised poor little Willie, and I can't go alone. This is the first year at Eton, you know.'

'Eton is going to the dogs,' murmured Arthur Sterney, sententiously; 'it isn't the same place at all, ever since all the rich snobs and their sons have gone there, and they've done away with fighting and caning; they want some of the good stand-up fights they used to have; the boys ain't half plucky, and the masters are always putting it down—make 'em into a lot of milksops if they go on; as if it wasn't natural to boys to fight and get black eyes! they enjoy it, and a good licking does 'em a world of good occasionally.'

'I'm glad I'm not a boy,' shuddered Maud.

'Oh, you'd like it if you were at school.'

'What a lovely style of work-basket that is of yours, Lady Eleanor!' pursued Mrs. Straightly, dropping the subject of Eton boys; 'something quite new, I am sure, and *so French*.'

'Yes, I flatter myself it is pretty,' said her hostess, turning the basket round that it might be admired on all sides; 'Madame Mousseline got it for me.'

'Ah, then, I was right; I thought it was French.'

The combination of barbaric splendour with a homely article intended for homely purposes might have been French, but was certainly incongruous; but to some minds a thing, however ugly, if unusual, is pleasing, and the highest form of praise that can be given seems to be '*so French*.' A book, or a dress, or a play, or a person, or a sentiment, all are equally applicable; to modern ears it has the sound of a word which highly delighted our grandmothers—'*vastly pretty*.' In mincing style and tightly drawn black skirt a lady now says, '*So French*!' where in pelisse and tippet she would have formerly murmured with a curtsy, '*Ah, how vastly pretty*!' 'Sir, I am *vastly obliged*.'

Mrs. Straightly presently moved away, accompanied by Lady Eleanor, whose dignified manner of receiving highly gratified those who were not so sure of their own dignity. Maud commenced whispering behind her fan with Arthur Sterney, and Bruce was left almost alone beside Luce.

'Did I hear you say you had seen nothing of Mr. Carrol?' she asked tremulously.

'Nothing.'

'I should like to know——' she began, and then stopped abruptly.

'Can I find out anything out for you? I am at your service,' he said, in a grave, resonant voice. Luce liked his voice. In nothing, perhaps, is character and education more noticeable than in that. No educated person leaves out his h's, or speaks with a broad and vulgar accent, and yet individuality is revealed

in a marvellous degree by the tones of the voice. Bruce spoke like a thinker, in somewhat slow and measured accents, and yet with a lilt and a nice sense of gradation that proved he had been accustomed to say things worth listening to, and not merely to fritter away an idle hour in small-talk.

‘Don’t you think you ought to see Mr. Carrol?’ said Luce presently.

‘Why? For my sake or for his?’

‘For his; you are such a friend.’

‘As long as I was of service to him he could count upon me, but now he is happy; he is fortunate and rich, and has a career—perhaps he would only deem me impertinent.’

‘And do you think the fortunate do not want friends quite as much as the unfortunate? Ah, you are mistaken there.’

‘The fortunate can always *find* friends; they do not need to seek them like the unhappy.’

‘It is sometimes difficult to define happiness, and I am sure no one is so perfectly happy as never to need a friend. I don’t think you appreciate Mr. Carrol as much as you did.’

‘Indeed, you are mistaken, but——’

‘But what? You look mysterious.’

‘It is not always advisable to say all that one thinks.’

Luce remained silent; she felt that it would savour of forwardness if she discussed Mr. Carrol’s friendships any longer. After all, what was he to her? She had no more right to offer even an opinion. She sighed.

‘And do you like this life?’ Bruce asked, emboldened by the sigh; ‘does it satisfy and please you?’

‘It is a good thing to see varieties of life,’ she said. ‘Girls know so little of *real* life. They never see it except through the medium of expediency and social prejudice.’

‘And a roseate hue is perhaps as good an one as any other to view objects through.’

‘You used not to talk like that formerly; you used to say that one ought to try and find out the truth of things, and only see them exactly as they were, without reticence of idealisation.’

‘Did I? And suppose I found I was wrong?’

‘Oh, no; it can never be wrong to seek for the right; just think, if there were no real right, and one had sacrificed everything for a shadow.’

‘That would indeed be unfortunate, but it is not likely; the scales would probably not fall from one’s eyes in that case.’

‘And how is the book progressing?’ said Luce, changing the subject, which she felt was likely to become personal.

‘Very well, thank you ; but, strange to say, I am getting a little tired of work.’

‘You ?’

‘Yes, I. Did you think I was a nature-bred slave and loved my chains ?’

‘I thought you a man likely to do great things.’

‘Thank you. Well, I suppose it is wrong and weak, but sometimes I feel inclined to throw away my manuscripts, my ink and my pen, and to go right away somewhere, and lead a ruminating life under blue skies, lie in a cowslip meadow, or on some sweet, quiet, lazy place.’—‘You are overworked.’

‘Do you think so? Do you really think a man ought never to sigh for relaxation, for pleasure, for innocent pleasure? or do you think I am constituted differently from other men, and am only a machine?’

‘I never thought that,’ she said, looking distressed. Just then Maud rose and began a prolonged leave-taking of Arthur Sterney, interspersed with joking recommendations and laughing rejoinders, and allusions which were incomprehensible to any but the initiated. He rose also, and stood silently in a stiff attitude, wondering whether he ought to bring his visit to a close. This problem was solved for him by Lady Eleanor, who, released from her attendance on other guests, beckoned him to her side and insisted on his drinking a cup of scalding tea. This occupation and Lady Eleanor’s stream of talk diverted his attention from Luce ; and he left the house, dissatisfied with himself and the interrupted conversation.

CHAPTER XLVII.

LUCE TORMENTS HERSELF.

SOME days elapsed : Bruce did not return, and nothing was heard of Dick. Maud, happily engaged in a chaffy kind of flirtation with Arthur Sterney, for whom the burlesque actresses had temporarily lost their charm, scarcely noticed Luce’s preoccupation ; and yet Luce was extremely preoccupied. Since that day of the parting in the shrubbery Dick had never written to her ; she was entirely ignorant of his doings, and uneasy lest in cutting him loose from herself she had sent him adrift into the world. If he should not feel sufficiently bound in honour to offer his hand to Lady Fenchurch, if Lady Fenchurch herself were to refuse him, if disgusted and fancy-free he were to plunge into excesses and dissipation, would not the consequences fall

upon Luce? He had assured her of his intention to lead a quiet, country-gentleman's life, to retrench, and to be charitable to his neighbours; he had evinced sufficient inclination for her to be easy on the score of his kindly treatment of her, but she had ungratefully destroyed all these good intentions, and thrown over his budding virtues the cold frost of her own withdrawal. She had meant well, truly, she had believed herself to be acting rightly, but that was not enough if it could be proved that she had *not* acted rightly. The very sensitiveness of Luce's conscience tormented and robbed her of tranquillity and happiness. It might be possible to imagine a condition of contented serenity, on which the consciousness of self-sacrifice should confer a double lustre, a state of rapt spirituality, where the spirit of the martyr left no space for the pains of the body; but to crawl wearily through life, feeling one had sacrificed one's own bliss quite unnecessarily for purely abstract idea of duty, resulting only in remote and unimportant consequences, was neither comforting nor flattering to the mind of a young girl, as anxious as her neighbours to extract all that was pleasant out of this weary journey on earth. Luce was no saint, and she had none of that impassioned fervour which keeps some people from ever suspecting that their own decisions can be wrong. She had hoped to hear something reassuring from Bruce, and to her additional annoyance it seemed as though a breach had come between the two friends. It was about this time, the season being now well advanced, and the lime-trees shedding a sweet fragrance over the languid riders in Rotten Row, that Luce, riding beside her uncle one day, caught sight of Dick. He was looking remarkably well, and was mounted on a handsome horse. Beside him was a lady—a young lady—and on the other side an older man, evidently her father. He immediately recognised Luce and her uncle, smiled, and bowed pleasantly. But he continued his placid ride beside the young lady, and showed no inclination to approach his ex-betrothed. Luce coloured violently, but strove to conceal it, hoping that a scarlet face might be placed to the account of the broiling sun.

'Ah! there's Carol,' remarked Mr. Highview, shaking his fist familiarly at him, as is the wont of men when they recognise an acquaintance. 'It's the first time I've seen him riding—a very good-looking chestnut, too, shows some breeding; he's fond of horses; I shouldn't wonder if he took the hounds next year. He'd make a first-rate master.'

'Yes,' murmured Luce, anxious to say something and appear unconcerned, but unable to find a fitting remark.

‘He spoke in the House the other night, and very properly, too, I am told.’

‘What was the subject?’ ventured Luce, tapping her horse nervously with her riding-whip.

‘It was a small affair, that pigeon-shooting business, got up by a lot of sentimentalists; but I believe Dick spoke in a very moderate and gentlemanly way.’

‘Do you know who was the young lady riding with him?’ asked Luce presently.

‘No, I don’t. But I recognised the man as a rich iron-master, who is in the House, Member for—— oh, I forget the name, somewhere in the Midlands.’

‘And that was his daughter, I suppose?’

‘Probably. Shall we canter on? If we meet Dick again I’ll ask him to luncheon, that is to say, if you don’t mind, my dear?’

‘I don’t mind,’ she said feebly, and they started off. But Dick never appeared again, and Luce returned home with a bitter pain at her heart. An ironmaster’s daughter, a rich girl, a pretty girl too, as far as she could judge by the slight figure and the golden locks neatly coiled under the black riding-hat. A spasm of jealousy shook her. It was not for this she had surrendered him. Not that he should play the butterfly, and perhaps marry the first silly girl he happened to meet.

Why had he not turned his horse’s head and spoken to her—just one word? He knew her well enough to surmise how kindly she would receive him. She had not reckoned on the strength of a man’s vanity, which causes him to forgive an injury sooner than a slight. She forgot that though her feelings towards Dick were not changed, yet that his feelings towards her could no longer be the same. Even though he did not love her, he could resent her withdrawing her promise and offering him advice. And so she fretted herself nearly ill over Dick’s neglect, fancying, like the foolish girl she was, that a man would remain her friend whom she had refused as a lover. A man’s self-esteem is the last of all his passions to die out. And while Dick rode with Miss Denvil as a pure pastime, thinking her a jolly, unaffected girl, and impressed with the conviction that her father’s champagne was excellent, once she was out of his sight he never bestowed an instant’s further consideration upon her—Luce, racked by unreasoning, acute jealousy, shed copious tears over his fickleness, as she called it, and passed a sleepless night. Oh, happy time of youth, when a look or a word from one we love has power to change the current of our thoughts,

to transport us from Hell into Paradise, to cloud a brilliant sky, or make the roses of happiness grow in the dull wintry weather ! Happy torments, happy aches and anguish, which the oldest of us would not exchange for the dull disillusion and stony unfeelingness of mature life ! These transports, these anticipations, these disappointments, these doubtings and despairs, are of the essence of love and youth ; no placid certitude can ever take their place. Lady Eleanor, who had been informed of the meeting in the Park by Mr. Highview, rallied Luce on her depression, and endeavoured by taunts and ridicule to rouse her pride and create regret.

‘It is your conduct, my dear,’ she said, as they swayed to and fro, in uncomfortable position, in the string of carriages that formed the approach to a popular ball, ‘that has driven away young Carrol, and now I hear he is always riding about with Miss Denvil, a sensible girl ; she will not refuse him ; her father made his money in trade, and she intends to marry well. Good gracious ! what a jerk !’ as her jewelled head was nearly propelled against Luce’s shoulder ; ‘this kind of thing is dreadful ; it makes me feel sick.’

‘You should not come for my sake, aunt,’ replied Luce earnestly ; ‘you know I don’t care for balls.’

‘Nonsense, child ; it is my duty.’ Duty or not, Lady Eleanor would sooner have nodded and swayed in her carriage for a full hour, as the trying prelude to a night’s dissipation, than have spent one single quiet evening at home.

‘But, as I said,’ proceeded Lady Eleanor, as soon as she had settled her *viffure*, ‘you have entirely spoilt your own chances. I suppose you are pleased, as it is your own handiwork, and you think yourself remarkably clever. For my part, I can’t conceive anything more ridiculous than a girl handing over her lover to another girl, who has more money than herself, and thus forcing him to do a mercenary action, which she chooses to qualify by the name of sacrifice.’

Luce bit her lips. This transcription of her own wretched thoughts was bitter enough in all conscience.

‘Real love to my mind implies mutual sacrifice. I never knew anybody who was in love who did not desire some return for her feelings. But you are a cold, hard girl ; I have always known it ; you never cared for me, and yet I have done everything to gain your affections.’

‘Oh, aunt ! how can you say such cruel things ?’ answered Luce, in much distress.

‘I wish I could say more cruel things, and make you see your

absurd conduct in a true light. You think yourself a heroine, your friends look upon you as a fool.'

Luce winced. Had she not believed the same thing herself in the solitude of her own room and the perfect confidence of her pillow?

'What good will it do you to be laughed at as an old maid, to grow sallow and sallower—old maids always enjoy headaches and bad health—to live in cheap lodgings, and go out to high tea in a cab, to keep a frowsy maid of all work, who steals the sugar and takes your writing-paper to indite notes to her young man? If that is the fate you prefer, to being the wife of one of the richest and handsomest young men in the county, I think I can assure you you have every chance of attaining it.'

A silent tear rolled down Luce's cheek. She must plunge into society, she must endeavour to forget. Much as she had shrunk from crowds and avoided assemblies, so much the more now would she pursue pleasure in hot haste. The best nun is she who has a fault to expiate, they say; the best trifler, the most ardent devotee of fashion, is the woman who tries to forget, to drown sorrow in amusement. Luce dried her tears, and contrived to make herself so agreeable to her partners at the ball, that Lady Eleanor regarded her with a smile of approbation. Her animated manner, the unusual colour in her cheek, her somewhat reckless talk, transformed the quiet, almost ordinary young person, whose smiles were sparse, and whose interest was only given to those worthy of attention, into a lively, frivolous girl. This was a change that delighted Lady Eleanor, and she promised herself to renew her sarcastic remarks, since the result had already proved so satisfactory.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

A MODERN COURTSHIP.

DICK meanwhile plunged into politics, as Luce had done into pleasure. Lord Lytton truly says, 'Who does not know what active citizens our private misfortunes make us?' The mind must find something on which to exercise its energies; foiled in love, a man naturally turns to ambition, and Dick was slowly and painfully acquiring a taste for the government of his country. It is a matter for wonder how few of the excellent young men, well born and well educated, who seek election at the hands of their constituents, really know or care much about

the serious problems that vex the modern soul. A young man of fortune and expectations takes a seat in the House of Commons as he would a chair in Hyde Park, to pass the time and gain a certain amount of interest and amusement. He dallies with Bills that affect the well-being of thousands of citizens, or votes for or against an expedition of war that must cost the lives of hundreds of his fellow-men, with the agreeable *insouciance* and perfect self-possession that characterize a young gentleman sure of himself and dressed by a fashionable tailor. He votes because he has received a 'whip,' and he listens occasionally to a few speeches which bore him and give him a headache. To such the House of Commons is a lounge, a more or less eclectic club, a place associated rather with ennui than with duty, and yet a creditable place enough, and one that every man who has nothing to do aspires to. In this light Dick himself had long regarded it, but, in spite of all, his friend Bruce's influence made itself felt as earnest convictions invariably must, and the superfluous vitality which had hitherto bubbled over in passion and flirtation was now devoted to understanding something of the difficulties and glories of statesmanship. He had not sought out Bruce lately for the reason that swayed most of his actions, because at this moment he did not need him. Everyone was very friendly to him in the House, and the fact that for the first time the county had been won by a Liberal, and that Liberal a young man, redounded to his credit and gained him a certain amount of esteem among the older members. Besides which, Bruce's face reminded him of certain passages in his life which he was anxious to consign to oblivion: his boyishly passionate adoration of Lady Fenchurch, heightened by the hopelessness of the adoration; his rapid cooling-off the instant his beloved was in trouble, and by her trouble caused him annoyance and persecution; his equally sudden engagement to Luce, and her inexplicable refusal to marry him, coupled with his latest shame-faced resolution to return to his allegiance to Lady Fenchurch, while hating the semi-humiliation it involved;—these were causes sufficient to make any man avoid a friend cognisant of his variability and inclined to act the part of Mentor. Dick was certainly sobered. The events of the past year had not been without their effect: he no longer sought the society of racing-men or gamblers. He retired earlier to bed, except when kept up into the small hours by the exigencies of a division, and he seldom went to balls. He saw Lady Fenchurch occasionally; she was now restored to her usual health, and in her widow's weeds looked remarkably handsome. Miss Fenchurch, to

whom everything had been confided, was their constant companion, and her absorption in the inevitable knitting made her a harmless and complaisant chaperon. The lovers had not much to say to one another; burnt-out love is difficult to relight, and Lady Fenchurch was usually occupied with her dress, while Dick, abstractedly smoking beside her, mused on the chances of the political future. They spent most of their time in the garden. Dick would run down for a day and remark the progress of the blossoms, or the brilliant aspect of the flower-beds, and these things afforded an item of conversation. It was very pleasant sitting under the big limes in an easy rocking-chair, with a profusion of cushions and rugs, and the sweet soft air, more sweet in contrast to the smoky, stifling atmosphere of London and the hot oppressiveness of the House of Commons, played round his forehead and wafted across the scent of the neighbouring hayfield. If anyone just a year before had foretold this scene, placid in its quiet and perfect in its repose, Dick must have hailed the prospect with joy; and yet now in the society of this beautiful woman, soon to be his wife, he occasionally yawned, and fell into long spells of moody silence, which seemed a strange contradiction to the apparent blissfulness of his lot. Pleasant as was the beautiful solitude, the soothing hum of the bee, busily dipping into the bosoms of the honeyed flowers, the gentle rustling of the branches, or the far-off sounds of country life, he was invariably restless and anxious to get back to town, until one day Evelyn observed it, and rallied him on his new love for work.

‘Surely it is much nicer here than in town. You can’t like hot dinners in stifling rooms and an atmosphere that seems to weigh like a stone on your head?’

‘It is much pleasanter here,’ he said, leaning back with his arms behind his head, and sending up whiffs of pale smoke into the still air.

‘Then what do you want? why are you so restless?’

She looked at him a little anxiously; no woman likes to feel that the power of her charms is waning. The Circes of real life never wish Ulysses to escape.

‘Am I restless? perhaps it is the heat.’

‘But it is hotter in London. Would you like some iced drink? I will send up to the house at once.’

‘I am not a bit thirsty.’

‘Then,’ she said, a little wearily, ‘perhaps you have seen some one you like better than me? That Miss Denvil you told me you were riding with, who is she?’

'The daughter of a man I met in the House ; a very nice little girl.'

'And rich, I suppose ? You don't want money now, Dick.'

'No—thank goodness !'

'And this girl, what is she like ?'

'I am sure I don't know. I can't describe her ; she is like everyone else.'

'Blue eyes, and golden hair, and a painfully small waist.'

'Exactly ; you have described her.'

'I am sure I should not like her. Pushing and forward too, I suppose ; plays tennis like a man, and smokes cigarettes after dinner.'

'Yes—don't you smoke ?' he said lazily.

'How aggravating you are ! You know I never smoke.'

'It is very unladylike, my dear,' put in Miss Fenchurch, who had dropped a stitch in her knitting.

'I think I should like to go to London for a day or two,' said Evelyn suddenly, after a pause.

Dick looked surprised, and Miss Fenchurch murmured—
'No, my dear, really, should you ? Hadn't we better wait till the autumn ?'

'Certainly not ! I wish to go now. Have you any objection ?'

'No——' Dick looked a little puzzled—'but isn't it rather hot ?'

'I dare say I shall not mind. The truth is, you have infected me with your unrest, and I feel I cannot stand another long dull month in the country. I should lose my appetite and get hipped.'

'My dear, you should take a tonic, and send for the doctor if you don't feel well.'

'I am quite well, thank you ; but you know it is the fashion of the present day. No one can stay long in the same place.'

'I could live here for ever,' said the old maid, casting a critical glance around.

Lady Fenchurch had her way, and a few days later was settled with her aunt in a private hotel. Dick took their rooms for them, and had them filled with flowers, at whose beauty Miss Fenchurch exclaimed with delight. Perhaps had she known that they were indebted for them to the taste of the valet, who had bought them in Covent Garden, she might not have been so touched at the attention.

'Very gallant of the young man,' said Miss Fenchurch, sniffing at a rose, 'very gallant. I must say he has most pleasing manners.'

'Flowers are common enough in London,' said her sister-in-law; 'one can buy them round the corner, anywhere.'

Evelyn had a shrewd suspicion that Dick had not given himself as much trouble as the old lady supposed.

'But the flowers are beautiful, just your favourites, Evelyn, and many a man would not have thought of that.'

Dick called in the evening and asked if the ladies were comfortable, and proposed the opera for the following night.

'The opera!' said Miss Fenchurch, 'you forget we are in mourning; indeed, I really never could imagine why Evelyn so persistently wished to come to London, for of course we can go nowhere—a widow attracts so much attention.'

'I will take a box, and Lady Fenchurch can sit behind the curtain.'

'Oh, yes, I can sit behind the curtain, and I know so few people. There *can* be no objection,' urged Evelyn.

So Miss Fenchurch was overruled, and the box at the opera was taken. Lady Fenchurch enjoyed music, and especially operatic music, and sat in her corner honestly delighted. One of her fine arms rested on the cushion of the box and the other lay in her lap. Her handsome features were lit up by a pleased smile, and certainly Miss Fenchurch might have been excused for thinking she would attract attention, with her marble-white skin enhanced by the sable draperies and her large eyes, whose lids drooped a little in languid pleasure. Dick, to whom the opera was not such a novelty, sat at the back of the box, but occasionally leant forward to take a look round the house, or to converse with Miss Fenchurch, who asked innumerable questions in ecstasies of astonishment and curiosity. In one of the critical glances he thus threw around, Dick thought he perceived some familiar faces in the box opposite. They were indeed Lady Eleanor with Luce, accompanied by a couple of young men. As Dick leant forward he caught Luce's eyes fixed on him with a pained expression. It was the first time he had met her since their engagement, with the exception of that one cursory glimpse in the Park; and he felt sorely tempted to go round and speak to her. But an instant's reflection taught him that this would be almost an insult. He could not go to her straight from Lady Fenchurch's side, and the fact of his being with a young lady who remained carefully concealed behind a curtain was in itself enough to raise her suspicions. How pale and sad she looked, scarcely ever smiling, or seeming to care what went on upon the stage, and only paying casual attention to the remarks of the young man

beside her. Dick wondered if she had suffered. Perhaps the only real and genuinely unselfish interest ever aroused in him by a woman, Luce had evoked. He could not help comparing her to other girls, and remarking that the balance was entirely in her favour. How he wished he could recall the past, that Lady Fenchurch had been rich and independent of him, so that he might have married his little, gentle Luce, and lived quietly with her in the country. He could imagine what a tender, loving wife she would have made, and that she would have indulged in none of the caprices with which other woman wearied him.

‘What are you looking at so persistently?’ presently asked Lady Fenchurch, for the curtain had fallen upon the second act, and she was free to notice Dick’s preoccupied silence and abstracted gaze.

‘Nothing—I mean it is a very full house; how do you like the opera?’

‘Very much; do you see a great many people you know here to-night?’

‘A few.’

‘I want to look too—there, I can just catch a bird’s-eye view through the curtain; ah, now I see what attracted you so—Lady Eleanor Highview and her niece. Well, she *is* a plain girl.’

She dropped the curtain, and resumed her former position. ‘Do you know, Dick, I think you are a dreadful flirt? I used to be jealous of your cousin Maud, and now I believe I ought to be jealous of that plain girl.’

‘That plain girl jilted me.’

‘Then your engagement to me is no great compliment: I am sure I am very much obliged.’ She put her bouquet up to her lips, and pretended to be annoyed.

‘I should not have been free had she not jilted me.’

‘Didn’t she care about you then?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You *do* know; why do you try to deceive me?’

‘Let us talk of something else. Does not my future life belong to you?’

‘H’m! well, I suppose it does; and you don’t wish me to ask inconvenient questions. It must be a bore to be taken up as Miss Windermere was, in a moment of pique, and then dropped again a little later.’

‘I don’t wish to discuss Miss Windermere.’

‘But she interests me; she is a study: she has good eyes;

but she does not look lively ; she would have been a dull companion to pass the rest of your days with.'

'Miss Windermere is very clever.'

'Oh ! I suppose a kind of blue ; reads Greek and goes in for the higher mathematics. Now, Dick, I am quite sure that is not at all in your line. You had far rather a woman were frivolous like me—confess I amuse you.'

'Yes ! but one cannot always expect to be amused.'

'Dear me, I thought you men only lived for amusements, and left all the boring, tiresome things to us women. We always wear more rigid mourning and stay at home, while you dine out.'

'What do you propose doing to-morrow ?' said Dick, desirous to interrupt her flow of satirical talk. He could see Luce where he sat, and he fancied she had grown even paler.

'I must go to see the pictures and the shops. I haven't been in London for such a long time, and there are quantities of things I am curious about.'

'I should like to visit Kensal Green,' said Miss Fenchurch demurely ; 'I am told it is so beautifully kept.'

'Oh ! fancy being anxious to visit a churchyard ; I hate to think of those things,' said Evelyn quickly.

'One ought always to think of one's latter end,' replied Miss Fenchurch piously.

Dick hurried off the ladies a little before the end, in order to avoid the crush, but there had been some mistake about the carriage, and they were forced to wait a few moments in the hall. While thus engaged Lady Eleanor and her party swept down the stairs and confronted them.

There was no escape. Lady Eleanor bowed stiffly when she saw who was Dick's companion, and Luce gave him a piteous glance. Never, perhaps, had he felt himself in such a painful and constrained position. Lady Fenchurch appealed to him affectedly, as though to prove that he was without mistake her cavalier, and in a few moments they were once more alone.

'The deuce take women,' thought Dick angrily ; 'why do they want to come to London ? If it had not been for this unlucky rencontre, no one would have suspected my relations with Evelyn Fenchurch, and now it will be all over London, and Luce must think I have shown indecent haste in thus braving public opinion.'

CHAPTER XLIX.

BRUCE FORGETS HIMSELF.

LUCE seldom sang now. She had never been a public performer; even in the smallest of coteries, her timidity absolved her from all necessity of giving her friends the more or less appreciated pleasure of after-dinner music, but she had loved to play and sing to Granny, and in her moods of excitement or depression she found relief in song. But with the desire and the anticipation of happiness her voice left her, and she frequently sat dumb and silent before the key-board, feeling unable to play a note, or to lift her voice above a whisper. In certain crises of emotion, music helps and comforts us, and proves a kind of safety-valve, but when we are crushed and miserable beyond the power of endurance, the very sound of music seems to irritate our pain. Nevertheless, the day after her vision of Dick at the opera, she sat down to the piano in the drawing-room, and feebly moved her hands over the keys. She had not the power to sing, but her fingers strayed almost without sense of volition into a little piece of Bach's. Granny was accustomed to play in the quiet evenings at Long Leam. It began with a quick gavotte in the minor mode, which Granny executed with surprising delicacy and precision, and contained a second movement, a kind of pastoral, of which Luce was particularly fond. Leaning back as she listened she could fancy the peasants dancing on the village green, and hear the shepherd's pipe; an air of freshness and candour seemed to surround and a flavour of antiquated simplicity enchant her. The music spoke of homely love, of simple truth and constancy, and often as she heard the familiar sounds they always produced on her the same effect, that of pleasurable content and quaint illusion. Now as her fingers strayed she forgot for the moment her weariness and her surroundings, and saw again Granny sitting at the piano in her prim upright pose, the pose habitual to ladies of her time, dressed in her handsome lilac brocade and pretty lace cap; her mittened hands lightly moving over the keys, and her kind head nodding in time to the dance measure. Behind her was the arched alcove with the brown-backed books heaped together in tawny mustiness, and the jars of priceless old china which garnished the corners. The faded chintz covers of the spindle-legged, uncomfortable chairs and settees looked ghostly in the dim light, and when Granny stopped playing there was a hush of tangible silence around—

the echoes of the past alone haunted the room. Absorbed in a recollection which seemed so clear and so real to her, Luce turned with a start and a rude awakening from the dream of the past she had delicately built up to a sense of the present, when the door of the drawing-room opened, and instead of the old lady and her music, and the shadows and stillness of Long Leam, there presented itself to her gaze the red satin furniture and hot-house flowers of Lady Eleanor's drawing-room, and close beside her Bruce bowing, hat in hand, and murmuring some confused sentences, of which she scarcely gathered the import.

'Ah, it is you, Mr. Bruce,' she said, regaining her composure by an effort; 'Lady Eleanor is out driving, and——'

'And you were playing—do I disturb you? Shall I go?'

'No, you can stay,' she said indifferently, executing a rapid scale on the instrument. 'I dare say my aunt will soon return, if you can wait.'

'I can wait,' said the young man, slowly fidgeting a little nearer to Luce, who, without rising from the music-stool, had offered him her hand. 'The fact is, I am glad we are alone; I wanted to talk to you quietly.'

'One can never be quiet in London,' said Luce wearily; 'there is such a perpetual whirl, and oh how sick one gets of it all! those endless hot balls and tedious parties, and the pretences and show which all mean nothing. People inviting those they don't care about, because it looks well, and leaving out the old true friends who are not smart or not fashionable enough to do them honour.'

'You would prefer to be at Highview?'

'Oh yes, indeed.' Luce rose and walked feverishly up and down. 'Just think how beautiful the roses must be just now; that La France, with its grand pink blossom, and General Jacqueminot, with leaves like velvet, and an exquisite aroma, and the golden petals of the *Rêve d'Or*; you remember how luxuriously it grew over the trelliswork at the entrance to the rosary?'

'I remember you showed me the plant, but the roses were over when I first saw Highview.'

'How glorious the summer in the country is; and to think that men's perverted tastes lead them to shut themselves up in a stifling town just when our English homes, and even this capricious English climate, are beautiful to perfection.'

'Yes, it is strange. I know but little of the country, I have

lived so much among my books ; and yet I feel—Highview taught me to feel—its beneficial influence.’

‘You should come to us in the summer ; but we shall scarcely be there this year till half the flowers are over,’ she added with a sigh.

‘Lady Eleanor wishes you to remain in town?’ he asked, seating himself as he did so.

‘Yes ; she says it is a part of my education. I wish my education were finished.’

‘It is like college for young men—an initiation into life.’

‘Is this life ? It seems to me more like a kind of stupor of the mind, in which only a few of the senses are alive.’

‘You will, no doubt, emerge from the ordeal scathless ; the very fact that your heart is not in it will prevent any harm accruing to you. I should be very sorry if harm came to you.’ His voice shook slightly. Luce looked up surprised.

‘You need not be anxious,’ she said quietly.

‘But I am anxious,’ he answered quickly. ‘You are suffering, I am sure ; just now, when I surprised you, there were tears in your eyes.’

‘I was thinking of Granny—of old Mrs. Carrol,’ she said simply ; ‘I miss her very much.’

‘Of course you do, Miss Windermere ; it may seem strange—you may think me presumptuous ; but you have been so much in my thoughts lately, if I could help you—if I——’

‘Thank you,’ she said gratefully ; ‘the sympathy of a friend is always acceptable ; and we were friends at Highview, were we not ?’

‘It has occurred to me,’ he continued hastily, ‘that I am answerable for your unhappiness ; that it was through my persuasion that Dick Carrol became a candidate for West Thorpe, and consequently an inmate of your house ; and that whatever annoyances befell you are owing to me.’

‘I have no annoyances,’ she answered rather coldly. He had no right, on the score of kindness, to try and worm out her secrets.

‘Now I have offended you. I have little knowledge of society. I am ignorant of the terms in which I ought to express myself ; but, believe me, I would do anything, anything to serve you,’ he said earnestly.

‘I am sure of it.’

If she had doubted for one instant, the honest ring of Bruce’s voice would have reassured her. And the interest he showed her she knew was not scattered broadcast. He was

reserved and shy, and as a rule avoided ladies' society. Consequently his attention was the more flattering, for in his own sphere of literature and study he was already well known, and almost famous ; she knew that also.

'When I see you sad it makes me miserable. Can I not help you ? Do you wish to see Dick ?'

'No, no !' She shook her head passionately.

'He has not behaved ill, surely. I pray of you confide in me ; believe me——'

'I have nothing to confide. Dick never behaved ill to me ; we parted—because it was best so.'

'And you are breaking your heart.' He jumped up and restlessly moved about the room. 'Is there nothing to be done ? I am your slave—your knight ; command me, use me.'

'Indeed, Mr. Bruce, I need nothing. A girl must not sit down helplessly with her hands folded because she has not got just the bit of happiness she fancied ; that would be weak and foolish. I try not to be weak.'

'And is all your life to be passed thus ?'

'No ; I shall get better and stronger, and perhaps I shall forget,' she said, smiling through her tears. 'I feel as if I could speak to you and treat you as my friend—as if you understood——'

'Yes, I understand.'

And as he looked at the little fragile figure before him with the waxen complexion and the large eyes, that seemed with their brilliancy to efface the small oval face, he thought, 'provided it does not kill her.' The mental life was so great, the physical power so small.

'But there are moments when I feel as if I had been mistaken—as if I had presumptuously overruled the decrees of Providence, and sought to control fate with my own weak hands ; and then I am devoured by tortures of remorse, of despair, and doubt.'

'Trust yourself, trust your own instincts, they are right.'

'Oh, you comfort me—it is something to be able to speak out without incurring blame or ridicule.'

'Will you let me be your friend ?—we are drawn together by a strange loneliness ; you are alone, so am I, and we both feel the need of communion.'

'But you are so clever, you have your books ; only yesterday I heard that your history had created a sensation.'

'The critics have been kind, but, even if it had been different, their opinion would not have altered my convictions ; where

one writes only to please, one does no good work—it must grow solely from knowledge and love. My work has been everything to me hitherto.’

‘And now——?’

‘Now—I must not say it. I must not breathe it—you will be angry.’

‘Are we not to be friends? Why should I be angry?’

‘Then I will tell you. Your image comes between me and my work——’

‘The image of your *friend*,’ she said, with emphasis, ‘should rather help than hinder work.’

‘But I dream too—I dream of a time when that friend might be more to me. I think words that cannot be said: I fancy, I build castles, fairy castles, and sometimes I whisper to myself that I love——’

Luce moved away a little, with a gesture of disapproval.

‘Don’t move; I may talk freely, mayn’t I? These are only dreams, you know, and dreams deceive; but I think, if I had the chance, how much I could love, and worship and *work* for the gentle object of my dreams.’

‘They are dreams, as you say, and they can never be fulfilled.’

‘Never? Oh, I know I am presumptuous, but as the humblest and most devoted of your servants, as the truest and most faithful of friends, as one who would count it honour to serve you, and a smile his highest reward—could you never permit me to love you thus?’

‘Mr. Bruce,’ said Luce very seriously, ‘all you have said is, no doubt, most flattering, and I dare say I am different to other girls; I ought to feel honoured by your preference, of which, indeed, I am not worthy; but it is my intention never to marry. I cannot marry without love—and I do not love—anyone.’

‘Luce, you are trying to blind yourself. If you cannot let me be your slave (I ask nothing, nothing in return) I will be content to wait and hope, if I may only be near you and hear your dear voice; but, if you will not allow my devotion, at least, do not kill yourself, do not ruin your whole life for a shadow. Let me go to Dick; he does not know how much you care—his heart is excellent—and let me tell him that you love him still.’

‘You must do nothing of the sort,’ she said, catching at his hand as he turned to go; ‘I do not wish for his love—now.’

‘You are sublimely unselfish, but you are foolish, too,’ he said very sadly.

‘Perhaps—are not all women foolish?—but yet they know their own heart best.’

‘Ah yes! who could attempt to read a woman’s heart? Not I, for one.’

‘You will forget all that has passed between us to-day, will you not, Mr. Bruce? Don’t think any more of me; I shall be quite happy, or, if you must think of me, remember I am content; but plunge as before into study and research—some day you will be famous, and I shall be *so* glad!’

‘And I shall have lost you. Oh Luce, my perfect Luce, let me try and make you happy, I know so well all you want; trample on me, despise me—do what you like—but let me love you.’

‘Just now I told you that my heart was dead, that I can never, never love again,’ she said, with gentle reproof; his earnestness raised her tender pity even while it wearied her.

‘I know you said so, but all life cannot pass thus.’

‘Perhaps life will not be long for me; at any rate, its duration is not in our own hands.’

‘If I had only met you first would you have loved me then? you look so fragile, and yet you are so tenaciously strong in your affections.’

‘I am tired,’ she said, leaning her head back against the chair; ‘is not the heat oppressive?’

‘And I have tired you—you, to whom I would fain spare the smallest fatigue; how selfish I am! Luce—I am still your friend, am I not? you will not retract your word, you will tell me all that concerns you, you will keep back nothing—it will be all I shall have to live for now,’ he added sadly.

‘And your book?’

‘My book, of course; but nothing, nothing can take your place.’ He walked absently towards the door, then, remembering he had not said farewell, he hurried back to where Luce sat pale and motionless in her chair, took one of her small white hands, kissed it passionately, stroking and kissing it with the broken words a mother uses over her child. Then, suddenly, without stopping to see if his passion had moved her, he turned and left the room. The whole thing had been so sudden, such a surprise, that Luce sat on for some moments where he had left her, stunned, the touch of his kisses seeming to burn her hand. The passion of love in cold, self-centred men is sometimes terrible in its intensity when once the outer chilly crust is pierced.

‘Poor fellow!’ she thought, moaning to herself. ‘Poor fellow!’

if I could only have loved him ; if I could but have made him happy ; but I can never forget Dick. His memory seems to have dried up every other emotion within me. Ah, if I could --if I could——'

CHAPTER L.

LEAP YEAR.

BRUCE walked straight home after leaving Lady Eleanor's house. The distance was long, and the heat intense ; but he felt neither heat nor fatigue. He passed through the little garden with a listless step, noticing neither the scarlet peonies forming so bright a bit of colour, nor the carnations Mrs. Flinks had spent all the afternoon in tying up carefully. He went straight upstairs to the little sitting-room, in which we have already seen him so often, sat down beside the table on which the big folios were heaped, laid his arms on the table and his head on his arms, and sobbed, sobbed, for the first time since he left school, like a child. He had been a poor weak fool. What need had he to insult her with his love, when he only meant to show his sympathy, and to comfort her ? If it had been conic sections now, or the early life of the Anglo-Saxons, he would have known how to speak ; he could have conversed rationally ; but love—what did he know of love or girls ? Ah ! he was an egregious ass, and it served him all well right.

Meanwhile this summer's day evidently encouraged inflammatory tendencies. Mrs. Flinks was shelling peas in the back kitchen, and as she did so talking to Eves.

'Yes, you may laugh, but I'm tired of this desolate life ; that affair with the young lawyer came to nothing ; he wouldn't propose till he knew the amount of my fortune, and I was too sly for him ; I wasn't going to let my gentleman have everything so easy as that.'

'I am sure you're right comfortable here,' said Eves, with arms as usual immersed in a tub of hot water up to the elbows. 'There's that Mr. Bruce, he gives no trouble at all, and pays his rent as regular as clockwork.'

Yes,' sighed the widow, dropping the peas into the basin with a resigned tic-tac. 'I used to think he was a fish, now I think he's a calf, tormented by calf-love.'

'Lor, mum, and whatever put that into your head ?'

'Well, he goes out more, and he's getting particular about

his dress. His coat really looks as if it were made by a tailor instead of by some old woman who had cut it out of a spare piece of alpaca, and sewed it together again at the seams.'

'Well, I never, you do surprise me,' said Eves, making a perfect blanc-mange of soap-suds, for it was washing-day, and she was 'getting up' a few little things for her mistress.

'It's simmering, Eves ; I'm sure it's simmering.'

'What, mum, the saucepan ? It's all right.'

'No, that man's love ; he's beginning to feel—is more wide-awake now ; he looks at me as he goes out as if I were a human being, and not a tortoise ; once even, when I shook my cap-ribbons in his face pretending to stoop down and unlock the door, he took an end of the ribbon in his hand, and as he stood there said quite sheepish-like, "What a pretty colour ! Do you call this pink ?"'

'You don't say so !' said Eves, not even interrupting her splashing to show surprise.

'Now you know, Eves, a quiet husband would suit me in many ways : firstly, because men are more constant when they don't see much company, and then they're more economical, and besides, they're always to your hand if you want them.'

'Surely, mum, he ain't proposed yet ?'

'No ; it's easy to see he's a gentleman ; he's always so polite, though shy in his manner, and—Eves, it's Leap Year !'

'Why, mum, you're never going to propose to him ?'

'Hold your tongue, you silly old woman ; there's more ways than one of proposing. You can wheedle and coax a man into most things.'

'Well, I declare ; I should like my husband to propose to me, and not to feel I had to do the man's work for him.'

'Eves, an idea has struck me. Here, take this basin, I'm going upstairs to change my gown, and I want you to help me——'

Eves did as she was bid, and drew her long red arms out of the soapsuds regretfully.

'Such a beautiful lather as it was, too,' she said, as she followed her mistress upstairs.

A quarter of an hour later, Mrs. Flinks knocked at Bruce's door.

'Come in,' he said quietly, for even when disturbed he was patient.

The landlady walked in ; she was nicely dressed in a fashionably-made summer dress, and wore a new and bewitching cap.

'Ah ! you are alone, Mr. Bruce, and dear me, those Venetian blinds not drawn down ; how careless of Eves ! I must give

her a good scolding.' She looked coquettishly over her shoulder as she proceeded to unfasten the blinds.

'Pray do not scold her,' he said, without moving, apparently engrossed in a folio, 'I opened them myself.'

'Then shall I do them up again?' she asked, letting them fall with a bang.

'No, no; you can leave them, the sun is nearly down.'

'To be sure it is.'

Mrs. Flinks pulled up the blinds, and, despairing of attracting her lodger's attention otherwise, came back and stood beside him.

'And to think you're always poring over those big books. You're looking pale, Mr. Bruce; it isn't good to work in this hot weather; you should take a rest.'

He shook his head. 'I can't afford the time.'

'Stuff! why, one volume of that history is out, and I'm sure it's stodgy enough to satisfy the public for a bit.'

'I am afraid you are not an admirer of my works, Mrs. Flinks.'

'Indeed, sir, I am; I learnt history and geography and the use of the globes at school, but I don't think we had quite such fat books to read out of. You'll excuse me, sir, but this weather is a little trying.'

Herewith the widow drew a chair to the table, and Bruce, who could not bear to be rude to the humblest woman, was forced to endure her proximity. She looked round the room.

'Aren't you dull here sometimes all alone? You don't go out as much as some gentlemen.'

'I cannot work except alone.'

'And do you never *play*?' she asked, with a seductive roll of her eye.

'I am afraid I am uncomfortably serious.'

'No, no, not uncomfortable, not at all. For my part, I prefer a man with some stamina.'

'Indeed.'

Bruce hoped she would soon come to the point to which she was leading up, and then depart; he fancied, perhaps, she had come to consult him on some money trouble, or about an investment.

'I don't think that friend of yours, Mr. Dick, has any stamina; he's too fond of throwing about shillings and half-crowns to hansom cabmen.'

'He is rich, and I am not.'

'Well, riches are not *everything*, though of course they do

count for a great deal. I have some little savings of my own, too ; it's right to save, don't you think, Mr. Bruce ?

'Certainly.'

'And whoever married me need not take me quite penniless.'

'Are you thinking of marrying, then, Mrs. Flinks ?'

'It is lonely, sir, for a widow—very lonely ; and the heart feels its own solitude.'

'It is not good for man to be alone,' said Bruce, under his breath. 'I suppose that applies even more to women.'

'Of course, sir ; and you, too, must be lonely.'

Bruce made a deprecatory movement.

'Not but what marriage is a lottery ; only when people are quiet and orderly, and know their own mind, there is some security. It's a great thing, too, for a man to have a profession—and a decent one. I suppose writing is a very nice profession ; brings you in a good deal, and doesn't require much outlay ; no plant or machinery, or offices, and no regular hours necessary ?'

'Well, I should scarcely call literature a paying concern, and it certainly means a great deal of work,' said Bruce with a smile.

'Indeed !' Mrs. Flinks looked a little disappointed. 'But you only want pen, ink, and paper, and a table. People must be very poor indeed when they haven't got that.'

'You have forgotten two other requisites : brains and perseverance.'

'Brains ! of course, you must be intelligent ; but then every business requires brains. You wouldn't believe how weary it is to be a landlady ; and perseverance—where should I be, if I didn't drudge away day after day ?'

'And you succeed, too, Mrs. Flinks ; you say you have saved money ?'

'A little, a very little ; but it's uphill work.'

She leant her arms on the table, and pulled out her handkerchief with a flourish and a considerable amount of sniffing.

'Are you in trouble, Mrs. Flinks ?' asked Bruce, fairly puzzled at the widow's manœuvres.

'No, sir, not exactly ; but—' here she sniffed again, 'I want a friend. What is a poor weak woman without a friend ? May I take your hand ? it is easier to speak so. And if you—can't you guess, sir, what I feel ? Brought up as I was to better things, and now reduced to let lodgings ! Ah sir, you're a man ; you must have a heart !'

'No, no !' exclaimed Bruce, drawing away his hand ; 'I have no heart.'

He thought that at last he guessed her meaning. He noticed with alarm the new cap, the diamond ring—her best, a Cape diamond set in massive gold—she wore on her finger: her appeal to his heart. No, no; was this indeed the satire on his sentimentality of the afternoon? He was being paid out in his own coin, and the very thought of it disgusted him. Mrs. Flinks sobbed more gently. Her ample bosom heaved in slow and decreasing movement under her summer dress. She clutched at her pocket-handkerchief nervously, and leant towards Bruce, as if she expected him to offer her his shoulder for support. In such an attitude—an attitude that a genteel young man would gladly avail himself of when in company with a nice-looking woman—it would have been easy to murmur endearing words, which need not be very coherent or very grammatical, but which would serve their purpose and clench the affair.

Presently, like drops of cold water falling on a heated surface, she heard Bruce's voice saying, in a suspiciously frigid tone:

'I am afraid you are not well, my dear madam. Shall I call Eves?'

'Oh dear, no.' The widow quickly withdrew her handkerchief from her face. 'I am quite well, but a little flustered; I'm of a nervous temperament. Dear pa always used to say it was the sign of a most refined and delicate organization. Dear papa loved refinement, although he was a ship's captain; and—dear me, Mr. Bruce, where are you going?'

'To fetch you a glass of cold water, madam.'

'Oh, pray, pray don't leave the room; I cannot stand solitude. Often I wish—I wish you would let me come and sit beside you in the evening. I could bring my work, and sit as still as a ghost; even the scatching of your pen is better than nothing. And then I could make you some tea: I have some my late husband gave me, it cost twenty shillings a pound, and it has a wonderful flavour——'

'Why, Mrs. Flinks, what would people say, if you came and sat in my room?'

'I don't care what people say,' she cried, throwing him a suggestive flash from her dark eyes; 'but,' dropping her eyes again, 'I should be very happy.'

Bruce stood aghast. He could not put the woman out by the shoulders, and how could he persuade her to leave the room?

'My good woman——'

'Don't good woman me! Listen, Mr. Bruce: I'm young, and I'm considered good-looking; and I'm saving, as I've told you; and it's leap-year—now will you take me?'

'Take you?'

'Don't you understand—bless the man, where are his wits? Will you have me for your wedded wife, to have and to hold? I'll mend your socks, and look after your clothes; and sit quiet when you're busy, and keep the inkstand filled; and we shall neither of us feel lonely—eh, what do you say? Wouldn't it be a nice thing for both of us?'

'A very nice thing, no doubt; but entirely out of the question.'

'Why, pray, why?' she said, waxing angry and red in the face. 'Ain't my house good enough for you, when you ink every blessed bit of furniture you come across; and I—with a piano and prints in my sitting-room, and a green moreen sofa as good as new; and don't think I'm uneducated. I was in Paris, and learnt French, and went to the Louvre, and know how to put on a bonnet with the best of 'em, mincing, short-sighted, painted madams! Out of the question, indeed!'

'Listen, Mrs. Flinks,' said Bruce, in his gravest manner; 'it is always a mistake when people try to reverse their proper positions. You are my landlady; I am your lodger. Do not let us alter circumstances. I have been very comfortable here; and I think you have no fault to find with me. Allow matters to remain just as they are; and I promise you never to revert to this little episode again.'

Mrs. Flinks sat dumb with rage and disappointment. Presently she said, with a pout,

'I don't think you *are* a gentleman; at least—are you engaged?'

'No, indeed, I assure you I am not.'

'Then you are *not* a gentleman, to lead a poor woman on to show the state of her heart and her feelings, and to expose her weakness, and then turn round on her like a steel spring, and say, "Shut up; you're only my landlady!"'

'I don't think I spoke quite so rudely as that.'

'I dare say you wrapped it up a bit more in your long words, and your fine language, but the upshot was the same; it meant, "You be off, and don't trouble me any more."'

'Well, we will not dispute,' he went up to the fireplace, where reigned a cascade of coloured shavings of paper, supposed to add beauty to the blackness of the grate, and leant against the mantelpiece, over which hung a fly-blown glass;

'but don't you think, perhaps, I am right, and that my advice was good?'

'I think you're a——' she stopped, choking with anger, in search of an epithet, 'a mean scribbler—a fish—there——'

He stood calmly, a sad smile flickering over his countenance. There was an irony about the persistency and impotent wrath of this woman, that reminded him of his own hopeless love. After all, allowing for the difference of satin chairs and hot-house flowers, and greasy repsand second-rate prints, and cheap muslin curtains, human nature was the same in both cases. Moths singeing their wings in the flames, aspiring to a distant and unattainable star. He could not be hard or cruel to the poor little woman; the pity for her was mixed with his own self-contempt. He, the strong wise man who had dipped deep into the well of philosophy, and drunk of the cup of learning, had been foolish and blind; and this silly creature, in her finery and with her meretricious charms, was no worse.

He spoke kindly.

'Mrs. Flinks, let us be friends. I am very sorry if I misunderstood you; if, as you say, I led you on, you must forgive a student who is not versed in the ways of the world.'

'You're knowing enough,' she muttered, 'to get yourself out of a scrape, anyhow. You're not so soft as I thought; perhaps, after all, you're a good riddance.'

'If it comforts you to think so, I shall not be angry; but, believe me, I should not like to hurt any woman's feelings.'

'A lady, sir; I'm a lady, though I do let lodgings. Woman's feelings, indeed! I suppose you think you're speaking to your washerwoman?'

'I beg your pardon, Mrs. Flinks, I scarcely know how to speak.'

'Well, I think you've spoken enough. There, I'm going, I've passed as unpleasant an afternoon as ever I passed in my life. I only hope when you propose to a young lady she'll treat you as you've treated me—woman indeed, I declare!'

Therewith Mrs. Flinks gathered herself up, shook her cap-strings and her bangles warningly in Bruce's face as he held open the door for her to pass out, and in a storm of frowns, pouts, angry glances and flashes from the brilliant black eyes departed.

'Well I never, Eves,' she said, as she sailed into the kitchen in all her finery, 'Bruce *is* a fish, after all.'

'What has he done now, mum?'

'Done? don't ask me, don't speak of him, and Eves—I feel so faint. I should like a relish with my tea; could you, could you get me some nice fresh shrimps?'

CHAPTER LI.

A SADDER AND A WISER MAN.

IMMEDIATELY after the unpleasant meeting at the theatre Dick urged Lady Fenchurch to return home. She had visited the Academy, he argued, and seen all the exhibitions, and been to the opera, and now it was time to leave London. With much regret Evelyn yielded to his entreaties ; she had never passed more than a few days in London, and it seemed to her that in the bustle and whirl of the gay city lay unknown possibilities of new excitement. However, Miss Fenchurch supported Dick's urgent entreaties and Evelyn allowed herself to be overruled. When they reached Oakdene the country was looking its loveliest. The green of the spreading trees still retained its tender and delicate hue ; the cottage gardens formed a blaze of pure white lilies, roses, and climbing honeysuckle ; each hedge was a thing of beauty crowned with trailing wreaths of clematis and winding tendrils of convolvulus. As the carriage turned from the dusty road into the lodge-gates, and drove up the shady avenue, Evelyn herself heaved a breath of relief to be once more in the cool sweet air.

'It is a very pretty place,' Dick said reflectively, looking round at the park.

'I wonder if its next owner will appreciate it as he should ; it is only mine for a year, you know,' said Miss Fenchurch, with a sigh.

'Is the man young ?' asked Evelyn.

'I don't know, I am sure. I think not. A middle-aged man with a family, I believe, but such a distant cousin we have no interest in him.'

Lady Fenchurch was silent. A middle-aged man with a family sounded hopeless. If it had been different, if he had been free and young, well, she was only marrying Dick as a kind of provision for her future. She could not live poor and friendless after having been mistress of Oakdene. She stole a look at Dick. His brow was seamed by lines she had never before noticed ; he looked worried and certainly older ; he was gentle to her, anxious for her welfare, but she could not conceal from herself that sometimes he seemed bored and sad.

'Here we are,' said Miss Fenchurch joyfully, 'and there is Puggy, and what fine flowers the gardener has brought !—how do you do, Biggs, and Mrs. Holden ?' this to the butler and housekeeper, who waited respectfully on the stone steps to

receive them, while the gardener, red-faced and hatless, stood by the pedestal vases holding a large bouquet of hothouse flowers in his hand. Miss Fenchurch was honestly pleased to be home again ; she was like a mushroom grown in a meadow, she could take root nowhere but at home, and the acute pang it caused her even to think of the time when she must leave Oakdene to the tender mercies of a new owner would scarcely have been guessed from her usually sedate and indifferent manner.

Lady Fenchurch stepped leisurely out of the carriage (she was not so *very* glad to be home), and the servants received Dick with the implied courtesy and respect due to one who was the future husband of their lady. Servants are quick at surmises, and they had long ago guessed the relations in which Dick and Evelyn stood to each other. In the library was a table with the tea-tray upon it, and a goodly pile of crimson strawberries set among green leaves heaped on a dish. Lady Fenchurch began to nibble at them directly, plunging her white fingers into the rosy mass. Miss Fenchurch attacked a bundle of letters and business communications, and Dick went to the window and looked out. Before him stretched the lawn and the flower-beds, one brilliant sheet of colour, but he was not thinking of them, his mind had conjured up a vision which annoyed while it pursued him. He saw always Lucy's pale face, her sad eyes fixed upon him with a kind of reproof and entreaty. She was certainly paler and thinner. Perhaps the season had not agreed with her, late hours weret rying to some girls. After all everything was her own doing ; he had been ready to marry her, to fulfil the contract, and *she* had willed it otherwise. Well, nothing could be changed now, he must not desert Evelyn. He turned and saw her standing there, smiling and beautiful, happy with her strawberries. Little things satisfied her ; she at least was never likely to break her heart.

'Have you as good strawberries as these at Long Leam?' she asked, noticing his steadfast gaze.

'Yes, I believe so.'

'You tell me so little,' she said reproachfully, as she daintily wiped the red stains from her fingers. 'Are there many green-houses, and do you grow orchids? I don't care for orchids—they cost a great deal, and they make very little show.'

'No, there are no orchids.'

'Your grandmother was very fond of flowers,' said Miss Fenchurch, looking up from her letters. 'I remember she gained prizes, several times, at the county flower-show'

'You never half describe the place, and you know I have not been there,' said Evelyn.

'Well, would you like to see it?'

'Of course I should, if it is to be my future home.'

'I think it would be very pleasant to drive over there in this nice fine weather,' added Miss Fenchurch; 'there could be no risk of catching cold, and we could take luncheon with us.'

'I dare say I could find you something to eat,' he said, laughing; 'Long Leam is not in the desert.'

'Is anyone living there, then?' said Evelyn, who had thrown herself into an easy-chair.

'Yes, my uncle and aunt Vincent.'

'Those horrid people!' burst out Evelyn.

'I let them stay there for a little—they are not rich, you know.'

'And very grasping of course. I have heard all about them. I must say you are very forgiving.'

Dick coloured. It was not generosity, but a kind of indifferent carelessness, that prompted him to offer his relations hospitality. He suddenly remembered Mrs. Vincent's extraordinary letters, and her attempts to worm herself into his confidence, and felt that his generosity must appear pure folly.

'When will you go?' he asked abruptly.

'Oh directly, any day,' said Evelyn who was gradually recovering her spirits, in anything but widow-like fashion. Miss Fenchurch was thoughtful. 'Perhaps your uncle and aunt will not like it.'

'They are only lodgers, only there on sufferance,' laughed Evelyn, forgetting the similar situation she occupied at Oakdene; 'they must go out some time or other.'

'I can write and tell them I am coming, and shall bring some friends,' said Dick. 'I ought to go there really, for I have so much business.'

'You must arrange it as you like,' said Miss Fenchurch, bustling off to order the dinner. Dick and Evelyn were left alone. They were not often alone, for Miss Fenchurch understood the duties of chaperone very literally, and, having due regard to the exigencies of mourning, Dick never ventured to ask any of the privileges of a lover. He touched her hand night and morning, he called her Evelyn, and he looked as much as he dared at her creamy skin and the depths of her fine dark eyes. But the prospect of matrimony, certainly, seemed to cool his ardour. The speeches he had poured out to Evelyn Bray as freely as the fountain lavishes its spray he

never made to Evelyn Fenchurch. It was true that she never encouraged him ; she seemed perfectly happy to have him near her, to call upon him for all the little offices a man can render, to ask his advice, and to enjoy the comforts of her easy life, but she never indulged in the sweet unreasoning talk that makes the bliss of lovers, in the delicious teasing quarrels, and inexpressibly delightful makings-up, that constitute the historical behaviour of two persons about to be married. There was friendship between them, a kind of cool gratitude on her side, a kind of disillusioned duty on his. Something of this sort passed through his mind as he saw her nestled in one of her peculiarly graceful postures in the depths of the armchair, one white hand negligently hanging over the arm, and her two little feet crossed on the small stool before her. The pose was suggestive, full of beauty and passive sensuousness.

‘Evelyn !’ She slightly turned her head.

‘Shall you like going to see my house, your home that is to be ?’

‘Oh yes,’ she said, ‘it won’t be a very hot long drive, will it ? Rachel fidgets me so with her knitting when I am in the carriage.’

‘I used not to think it long when I rode over to see you last year—do you remember that day in the pine-wood, when you were so unhappy ?’

‘Oh please don’t talk of disagreeable bygones. I can’t think why one is never allowed to forget.’

‘Oh ! if one only could !’ he said with an accent of intense earnestness.

‘Of course one can. Try not to think of disagreeable things.’

‘Do you never think ?’

The speech was almost rude, but he felt he must utter it.

‘Never more than I can help. What is the use ? Nobody can alter fate.’

‘I am not a fatalist. I think if I had known—oh, yes—things might have been different even for me.’

‘But then you would *not* have known,’ she said, placidly twisting her rings on her slim fingers. ‘That is the beauty of not worrying one’s self ; one never knows what may happen, and all the precautions one takes in case of accidents are useless.’

‘Do you love me, Evelyn ?’ he asked gravely.

‘I ? Of course ; I thought we settled all that long ago.’

‘Settled it ! Do you mean ended it ?’

‘No ; you will perversely misunderstand. Are we not engaged ? Well, is not that settled ?’

‘I was engaged to another girl once.’

‘Oh, yes, I know—that plain Luce; but you broke it off; you were quite right. You had no need to marry for money.’

‘I was not marrying her for money. Perhaps it may seem strange to you, that girl loved me.’

‘Really! Then I wonder she let you go. I shouldn’t, I know.’

‘Luce is a strange girl, but she is very high-minded.’

‘Please don’t talk to me of the perfections of the girl you didn’t marry; that would be nearly as bad as a discourse on the virtues of a departed wife; the best proof of her unsuitability is that you did not marry her.’

‘And you don’t believe in self-sacrifice?’

‘Self-sacrifice! a thing for old maids and sisters of charity. I don’t believe any girl gives up her lover from a sense of duty; that sort of duty merely implies a very poor kind of love.’ Evelyn spoke with assurance, a half-contemptuous smile playing round her lips.

Dick, who had worked himself up into a kind of belief that Luce was almost a heroine, a self-sacrificing, loving girl, now decided that he must have been mistaken; women surely judged their own sex more accurately than men could do, and Luce might not have cared for him. He felt a little happier, and at the same time strangely disappointed. He would have liked Luce to be miserable because she had lost him; and he would have liked Evelyn to be proud of her own triumph. Instead of which she took it all as a matter of course, and he seemed to have been tossed from one woman to the other like a kind of shuttlecock.

‘When shall we go to Long Leam?’ he began again.

‘Pray arrange it with Rachel. She will know all about the sandwiches, and the horses, and the distance.’

‘But I want *you* to care,’ he said, trying to infuse tenderness into his voice.

‘So I shall, if the place is as nice as you say, and there are plenty of greenhouses. I am passionately fond of fruit.’

‘That is it!’ he said to himself, as he went upstairs to dress for dinner. ‘Passionately fond of *fruit*, but not of *me*. Have I made a mistake after all, and been ridiculously Quixotic?’ And again the image of Luce pursued him in his dreams, and he heard her say in that soft liquid voice which always soothed him :

‘Do you think I can make you happy? I will try, but *do* you think I can?’

Her diffidence was very charming, for when did a young man think himself unworthy to possess the prize for which his soul thirsted ?

CHAPTER LII.

DICK GROWS HEROIC.

THE warm and luscious July weather continued. The expedition to Long Leam was accomplished under the most favourable auspices, and Mrs. Vincent, fortunately ignorant of her nephew's engagement, received Lady Fenchurch with acid politeness. At all times she was jealous of the influence of pretty women, and especially so of the woman who had already entrapped Dick into her toils. But she remembered her own precarious position, and, like many of her betters, swallowed the indignity of condescension for the advantages to be gained therefrom.

'What a quaint old house !' observed Evelyn, looking round the drawing-room wonderingly. 'And what old-fashioned furniture !'

'My grandmother took care of all the old things, and never bought any new. Poor thing ! I remember well, she said my wife would want new furniture, and she would save her money for the purpose.'

'Very nice of her, indeed,' said Evelyn, poking her fingers into jars of *pot-pourri*, and feeling the thin old damask of the curtains ; 'of course one couldn't live without comfortable chairs and dozens of little tables. I wonder how these old people managed.'

'They managed very well,' said Dick, a little drily, piqued at the contempt that pierced through her condescending praises. 'I am sure Granny was a picture.'

'That's so like men ; they never know what one has on, and because an old lady wears a handsome silk gown they think her beautifully dressed. Now, pale lilac silks are quite out of fashion.'

'Oh, I don't know,' he said, biting his moustache impatiently ; 'I can't quite talk about Granny unconcernedly. She was so good to me. But come now and have a look at the bedrooms ; there is a lovely one that faces the west—see if you would like that.'

'Not the one your grandmother died in,' said Evelyn quickly, with a shudder. 'I am so afraid of ghosts.'

‘No, not that one,’ he said contemptuously; ‘one in the newer wing.’ She followed him, shaking her handsome crape-laden skirts as she went.

Mrs. Vincent noticed everything, and an expression of ill-will passed over her countenance.

‘Those two are a little too fond of each other’s company,’ she said, with an unpleasant look at Miss Fenchurch. The old maid was her match.

‘Those two? Ah, you mean Evelyn and Mr. Carrol. Poor child! her nerves have been so badly shaken ever since my poor brother’s death, that I am glad if she will take the smallest interest in anything.’

‘She looks well nourished,’ remarked Mrs. Vincent, with a genteelly modulated snort.

‘Appearances are deceptive,’ said the old maid, pulling her knitting out of her pocket.

‘You only knit,’ said Mrs. Vincent, dropping the obnoxious subject; ‘you should see my girls’ crewel-work.’

‘Crewel-work, fudge!’ replied Miss Fenchurch. ‘Now, there’s some sense in knitting; hand-made stockings have twice the wear in them, but I can’t see the use of covering sofas and chairs with things that look like darned dusters—darned, too, with worsted that don’t match.’

Mrs. Vincent shrugged her shoulders, so much plain good sense shocked her. Had she not spent mints of money in procuring for her daughters all the advantages of fashionable accomplishments? Meanwhile the young people, tired of rambling, had come to a standstill in the large best bedroom. The western setting sun threw slanting beams of rosy light upon the carpet and on their faces, and touched Evelyn’s finger-tips with a pretty ruddiness.

‘Confess it’s a nice old house,’ said the young man, looking round with a proud sense of possession, ‘and it’s so well built—such thick walls, such doors, see; and the paneling—those old fellows did know how to build.’

‘Yes,’ she said, fascinated by the quaint curves of the old carved chimney-piece, ‘the walls are as thick as those of a prison.’

‘What a comparison! It shall never be a prison to you.’

‘No,’ she answered, laughing, and moving on to examine a print. ‘I can admire this at least. What a sweet Bartolozzi!’

After luncheon they visited the gardens, and paced the smooth gravel-walks, and went through the grove, which, damp with a layer of decaying leaves in the autumn, now offered to their feet the softest carpet of green moss. Lady Fenchurch was in

great spirits. She laughed at Dick's little sentimentalities over the place ; suggested an improvement here or an alteration there, and viewed everything with the eye of an expert. Dick would have liked her to be a little more sober, a little more subdued, but how is it possible, except in a carping spirit, to find fault with a beautiful woman who leans on your arm as she walks, and accentuates her observation by the slightest possible pressure whenever she is interested? Evelyn passed a pleasant day, and Dick tried to feel perfectly satisfied. Miss Fenchurch spent a less happy day, for Mrs. Vincent annoyed her, and showed her nothing really interesting, except a new kind of incubator warranted to hatch chickens by the thousand. The sight of this arrested Miss Fenchurch's attention for a considerable time ; she wanted to know how everything was managed, and whether the machinery ever went out of order, and the exact principle of its working, and how the heat was to be regulated. Occupied in these housewifely cares the latter part of the afternoon passed more quickly than she had anticipated. Dick watched the ladies drive off with mixed feelings. He had stayed behind on a plea of business, and he rather dreaded facing Aunt Vincent in the bosom of her family. He was certain she would ask disagreeable questions, and show interfering inquisitiveness. But to his surprise she did nothing of the kind. She talked of indifferent subjects, carved the lamb and dispensed the strawberries with affability, if not with grace, while Vincent himself was in an affectionate state of semi-sobriety, and Dolly and Eliza, as usual, giggled innocently together at nothing. Dick alleged heavy arrears of letter-writing as an excuse for not reappearing in the drawing-room after dinner, and retired to his own den with a pipe to chew the cud of solitary fancy. He missed his grandmother more than he could have believed, and now that he had attained the wishes of his heart, now that he was rich, courted, and free to marry the woman for whom he had once conceived a kind of insane passion, he felt a strange sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction. He filled his pipe and sat motionless, thinking and smoking, the pile of letters lying untouched before him. He reviewed his past, and remembered what he had so often said to Bruce, ' All I ask is to be allowed to live my own life as I please.'

Faithful Bruce, where was he now? Plunged as usual in study he supposed ; *he* could find happiness in that, while Dick, with every desire gratified, still wished and longed for—he knew not what. He resolved to write to Bruce ; he was to blame in not having done so sooner, for the poor student had no time to

make new friends, and naturally clung to the old ones. This sultry summer weather, too, though cool under the wide-spreading old trees of Long Ieam, must be stifling in London. Bruce might be ill, knocked up by work and heat. Why should he not come here and set up his inkstand and folios in one of the many cool chambers of the semi-inhabited old house? He might work undisturbed. Dick did not care, for he could roam about the fields and look at the young pheasants and break in the chestnut colt. Certainly Bruce must come and see Dick at home, in his own house, master of his property, doing as he listed. He took up his pen to write the letter while he was in the mind, and as he did so the clock struck two. Two o'clock already, and how still the old house seemed. His den, panelled with old oak, was dark at all times, and now only dimly illuminated by the light of two wax candles placed on the writing-table. A crowd of shadows seemed to gather round, and a number of old memories crept about him. How many people had sat in that room already, and thought their thoughts, and fretted out their passions, who now lay mouldering in the dust. Sometimes in an old house, filled with the memories of long years, the ghosts of bygone ancestors seem to be more real than one's own petty life. Dick felt it at that moment. He laid his pipe on the table, and buried his face in his hands. That life he wanted to live for himself, was it indeed his own, was it not rather the accumulated sum of all those ghostly ancestors' lives? The family traits, the family weaknesses, had they not always hemmed him round and carried him away. The long line of forefathers counted for something after all; the massive walls had retained some germ of spiritual affinity; the very air was impregnated with the odour of their dead bones. *Live his own life*, who could do it? *noblesse oblige* in the strongest sense by hereditary tendencies. He sighed. The atmosphere seemed stifling, like the heaviness that is the predecessor of a thunder-storm. That odour, too, that filled his nostrils, how strange it was, like something sulphurous. No doubt the lateness of the hour, the gloomy shadows around, made him fancy all these queer sepulchral visions; yet certainly there was something abnormal in the night. An overpowering dense heat, a smokiness in the air. A tiny rim of light stole under the door at that instant. Half stupidly he wondered if it were Uncle Vincent going to bed, then with a sudden return of calm reason he guessed instinctively at the cause of his odd sensations. He started up, taking the candle in his hand, and threw the door open sharply. A thick crowd of smoke burst in through the

aperture, almost stifling him, and a red spot in the distance confirmed his fears. Down the dark passage he flew, pushed open the swing-door that led into the gallery, where, one peaceful night before, among the moonbeams and the silence, he held Luce for the first time in his arms, and heard her broken words of love. No time for memories now. The oaken floor was cracking, flames darting up to the ceiling. He turned and flew back down the passage, stopping only to peal the loud alarm-bell, and hurried by to knock at his aunt's door, crying 'Fire! fire!' then darted hither and thither, calling, waking, terrifying the inmates of the house, until the servants, trembling and half-awake in their scantily hustled on garments, stood round him.

Dick was in his element. He was brave, and he knew how to command. The buckets, some of which were already mouldy from age and disuse, were quickly brought out, a cordon formed to the pump in the stable-yard, and several messengers dispatched for aid and a fire-engine to West Thorpe. The stupified servants worked with a will, and presently Mrs. Vincent and the girls, white with fear, joined the salvage party. But the age of the house was sadly in favour of the devouring flames; the thick oak beams resisted manfully, letting themselves be charred externally, and retaining their sturdy heart untouched; but everything else was dry as tinder, and the flames, spurting upwards, with fury and velocity unequalled, licked greedily at the plaster and woodwork. Ceilings fell in with a crash, fine old furniture became a heap of tinder, iron rods and supports were bent as by the grasp of an infuriated Titan, and all the while, as though drunk with its own triumph, the fire grew and grew, and the lurid glare lit up the sky and startled the villages for miles around.

'Are we all here?' said Dick, looking about, his face pallid and drawn with anxiety.

'Every one, sir—thanks to your timely warning,' said the old butler, whose white locks waved in the hot blast.

'Thank God, then; now let's try to save something.' The drawing-room and gallery over it, Granny's old room, and the dining-room were helplessly burnt. It was there the fire had raged most fiercely, but the new wing in which Mrs. Vincent and the children had lived seemed as though it might be saved. The men redoubled their efforts. New recruits arrived every moment, and the fire-engine had at last made its appearance. There was a large incandescent flaming mass between the outside walls, which still stood grim and blackened, and the new

wing, and, if it were possible to save the wing, the fire might possibly burn itself out in the molten cavern it had formed.

‘It’s the wind, the wind, I’m afraid of,’ said the old gardener, looking anxiously towards the west, ‘it seems to be rising.’

Just then the flames gave a mocking leap, and darted across. In a moment the new wing was in flames.

‘Oh, my jewels! my jewels!’ shrieked Mrs. Vincent, ‘save them, somebody—save them.’

‘Where are they?’ asked Dick, standing close beside her.

‘In my room. Oh! the flames are terrible; see in another moment my room will be burnt.’

‘I will get them if it is in man’s power,’ said Dick, rushing towards the burning mass. He had forgotten Mrs. Vincent’s property in his great desire to save the pictures, which, cut hastily out of their frames, were cast on the ground, amid a motley heap of furniture and plate dashed from the windows, and saved to the best of each man’s ability. But to Mrs. Vincent her little possessions, her trinkets and jewels, were as precious as the family heir-looms to Dick. In a fit of self-reproach he determined to rescue them himself. It was no easy task; the flames, scarcely intimidated by the showers of water poured on them, rioted sublimely in their fearlessness. Had it not been a dreadful it would have been a sublime sight. The great sheet of flame dancing and quivering with bacchanalian delight, the tongues of fire leaping up in wild ecstasy to fall back in sullen intensity of power, the group of helpless creatures battling with the awful strength of consuming elements, and with white despairing faces, ironically tinged with rosy hues, watching each fresh advance and victory of the fire. It was easy to get into the wing by the back door, but to make his way into Mrs. Vincent’s room needed all Dick’s courage and daring. He had to tread on burning floors, and he felt the scorching heat seize his hair and moustache. Outside, the breathless crowd viewed him in silence. They could distinguish the black figure cautiously feeling its way and fitfully illuminated at intervals by gleams and flashes of light: now lost to view for a moment behind a pillar or a rafter, then emerging, still steadily advancing; he was on the threshold of Mrs. Vincent’s room, and now he was in it. A shout of applause arose. Dick groped his way about. In another instant he had the jewel-case in his hand, but as he turned to the door a sheet of flame and smoke swept in and hid him from the affrighted spectators. Some of the maids swooned. This was too terrible; to risk one’s life for jewels, seemed to them almost profane.

'Throw me a rope,' cried Dick, suddenly appearing at the window, blackened with smoke, yet apparently safe and sound. A ladder was brought and put up against the wall. 'A rope, a rope!' shouted Dick again. No one could remember where such a thing was to be found. 'A rope!' again shouted Dick, and he stood there, like a young hero outlined against the cruel leaping flame. Then a crash was heard, and the women hiding their faces cried 'Oh!' with a long-drawn shudder. It was only a bit of the wall crumbling. Dick still stood at the window waiting. He had torn in strips and knotted together some sheets and let them down, but they were too short, a leap thence to the ground would still be dangerous. A cry of anger rose from the group below, 'Where is a rope? Do bring a rope.' As usual, in such cases, no one remembered where anything was to be found; the butler knew there were ropes on the premises, but could not state where; the gardener thought they were in the loft, and hither and thither each one ran, frightened, bewildered, and helpless. And all this time Dick stood at the window, and the flames gained upon him, and the heat was almost intolerable, and there seemed no way of escape, but death on all sides. If he waited, certain death; if he jumped, probable death. 'Jump,' was the cry from below now, 'you had better jump.' He saw a blanket stretched by willing arms beneath him, he gazed into anxious eager faces. He knew they would save him if they could, and yet he hesitated. Just then a burning blast touched his face, his clothes were on fire, his hands smarting with pain. He still held the dressing-case in his hand. 'Accursed thing!' he thought, 'shall I die for you?' and Luce's face rose before him in the angry flame, and her eyes so clear and deep looked reproachfully, as they had done that night at the opera. 'Catch it,' he shouted as he tossed the dressing-case on the ground. It burst open from the shock, and cases of diamonds and pearls fell at the feet of stable-men and gardeners, who, never heeding, still held the blanket, and still shouted to him 'Jump.' He was feeling giddy, the heat and smoke were choing him, but he had saved the jewels at least, he had not died a coward. Perhaps, after all, this was as good an ending to his life as he could have dared to hope for. They were coming nearer, nearer, in their devilish gracefulness and strength—the hungry flames; what pain, what fearful heat, he could endure it not longer! 'O God, have mercy on me!' he cried out. Then he jumped.

CHAPTER LIII.

LADY FENCHURCH RECEIVES A SHOCK.

IN the cool clear morning light, the great pile of buildings stood a blackened ruin. The strongly built walls resisted the fire, but the heart of the structure had melted away, and showed only a hideous chasm. Some of the furniture, and most of the pictures and plate, were saved, and Mrs. Vincent's jewel-case; but Dick, the hero of the affair, the man who had risked life and limb, lay terribly injured and unconscious in the bailiff's house, whither he had been carried after his accident. Mrs. Vincent scarcely knew whether to mourn or to rejoice. *If* anything happened to Dick the inheritance was her husband's, and yet that he should have risked his life and perhaps lost it for her was a terrible idea. She tried to comfort herself and still the vain upheavings of her desire by repeating that one must conform to the decrees of Providence, that He knew best, that Dick's fate lay in His hands, and so forth, but inwardly she was possessed by a febrile anxiety, and watched every symptom of his condition with unceasing interest and never-failing acumen. The rest of the family picnicked as best they could amid bales of furniture and piles of chairs and tables and picture-frames, heaped together just as they had been rescued. There were no regular meals, and everything took place in delightful confusion. Dolly and Eliza were enchanted. It was the nearest approach to romance they had ever experienced in their uneventful lives, and they made the most of the opportunity. They dressed themselves in all kinds of odds and ends and wandered about hand-in-hand amid the smoking ruins, expecting to find some valuable treasure in their midst. Glass smoked till it looked like bronze, opaline crystals formed from the action of the heat, molten lead run into the most grotesque shapes, rewarded their search, but the treasure lay only in their imagination. But the poor old butler had discovered something. Being considered too weak to hold the blanket, he had stood by anxiously at the time of the incident of the dressing-case, and, as it burst open by the violence of the fall, he hurried forward to collect the fragments. He picked up the various cases and some of their contents, and as he did so noticed a packet wrapped in white paper, with the seals broken, and addressed to Lady Fenchurch. The superscription puzzled the old man for the moment, then, as all the facts flashed on his memory, he put the packet in his pocket, and gathering up the

rest of the valuables hurried the dressing-case into a safe corner. Mrs. Vincent, distracted between the intensity of her observation of Dick's movements and her desire to obtain safe possession of her jewels, had not noticed the old man's manœuvres, and when the jewel-case was finally shown to her as safe, though somewhat damaged by the fall, she made only a hasty survey of its contents. Meanwhile the old butler, having examined the packet and satisfied himself that it contained the pearl necklace, kept his own counsel and determined to say nothing until Dick was sufficiently recovered to understand the importance of the discovery.

The news of the disaster, coupled with a very exaggerated description of Dick's dangerous condition, reached the inmates of Oakdene through the servants' gossip. The butcher had told the cook, who had told the butler, who thought it his duty to communicate the intelligence to Miss Fenchurch. The old maid was dreadfully shocked. She hurried into her sister-in-law's boudoir, where she was busily decorating the pug with a new scarlet ribbon.

'Oh, Evelyn! your new home and poor Mr. Carrol, oh, dear! and all the fine old furniture, too——'

'What has happened, Rachel?' said Lady Fenchurch, rising quickly and upsetting the pug somewhat rudely on to the floor. 'You really should spare my nerves a little, especially as I did not sleep well last night.'

'My dear, I am so sorry.' Miss Fenchurch sank breathlessly into a chair. 'But then fires do not happen every day; it is the first bad one I remember in all my experience.'

'Fire! what fire?' Evelyn turned a shade whiter than was her wont.

'Well, really I don't know; they say Long Leam is burnt to the ground; nothing left but a heap of ashes; and Mr. Carrol, after doing wonders to save everything and everybody, is dying from the result of fearful wounds.'

'Dying!—how horrible!'

'Yes, my dear; and burns are such terrible agony. I remember when Sally Brown's child was scalded by the tea-kettle, her shrieks were awful to listen to.'

'We must go at once, Rachel.'—'Go where, my dear?'

'To see Mr. Carrol. Here, I'll order the carriage immediately. Smith can be round in a quarter of an hour; and you go and put your bonnet on.'

'And your nerves?'

'They are all right—I shan't break down.'

'But, my dear, you are a young widow, and no one knows anything of your relation to Mr. Carrol. It would be indecent—positively indecent and unwomanly. I couldn't countenance it, my dear; I couldn't indeed—not with my dear dead brother's widow.'

'Unwomanly! indecent!' Evelyn walked up and down passionately; 'when, perhaps, for the only time in my life, I wish to do a right and an unselfish thing! Do you think I like sickness and suffering, and, perhaps, death? I loath it—I shrink from it. I could run away from it, and yet I must go. Remember, I am to marry this man.'

'But not yet, my dear; not till a decent period of mourning has elapsed—What will people say?'

'Decent period of mourning! Am I to wait till my crape is worn out, to help a fellow-creature? Besides?—suddenly changing her tone, 'just think; I have never seen a fire; and it must be so interesting.'

'A morbid love of excitement,' moaned Miss Fenchurch; 'a purely morbid love of excitement! What are the young women of the predest day coming to? Ah! if you would only knit, my dear; it is so steadying to the nerves.'

'No doubt—no doubt'—Lady Fenchurch stamped her foot impatiently; 'but I'm going now—do you mean to come?'

Poor Miss Fenchurch sighed. She wished she had never reported the butcher's conversation, for, after all, it might not be true; but, like a docile dog, she followed Evelyn upstairs, and prepared to put on her things. During the drive Lady Fenchurch was in an unwonted state of excitement. She could not help feeling the unconventionality of her proceeding, and, at the same time, enjoying it with the geniality of a school-girl. She was so tired of the trappings of woe, and of the necessity for quiet retirement, that this totally unexpected excitement tickled her nerves pleasantly.

The day was bright and fresh; the golden corn waved in the fields, ready for the reaper's sickle; the blue sky, dappled with clouds, arched high and light above their heads; the scented hedges, the profusion of wild flowers, offered an agreeable prospect to their eyes, and made the contrast between the present and the future even more dreadful. An old home in ruins, a dying man, her own sad fortune, were not agreeable subjects of meditation, and yet, as she drove along, Evelyn's spirits rose, spite of herself. Miss Fenchurch gloomed in silence. She had never before been called upon to play propriety on such an occasion as this.

‘Do you think he will know me?’ asked Evelyn suddenly.

‘Know you? I suppose he will have his head tied up in a bandage with ice upon it. You are surely not going to penetrate into the young man’s bedroom?’

‘I shall go to Dick, wherever he may be.’

‘Humph!’ ejaculated Miss Fenchurch; ‘no young woman in my day ever presumed so much as to know that a young man *had* a bedroom. That kind of subject was always slurred over with propriety.’

‘You forget I am a widow, and not an old maid,’ wickedly said Evelyn.

‘Yes, my dear, I know that; and I know also what St. Paul says in the matter.’

‘Please don’t quote St. Paul; besides, here we are——’

The lodge-gates stood open; crowds of people paraded the park, and there in the distance, where the handsome old house used to be, the black walls reared themselves gaunt and lonely. Beyond, the grove was intact, and the light-footed Mercury still poised himself in the attitude of flight on the golden base amidst the dark-green foliage.

‘Oh, Rachel, it is dreadful! and to think we lunched here only yesterday, and I chose my own room—the one with the western aspect,’ said Evelyn, standing up in the carriage to see better.

‘I wonder if it was heavily insured; of course, all that old furniture and the Adams carving is gone for ever,’ said the old maid, ‘besides half the time the insurance offices dispute your claim.’

They drove up at that instant, and a civil policeman answered their inquiries.

‘Mr. Carrol is very bad I believe,’ he said, ‘but you’ll find them all down at the bailiff’s house there—it’s only a few hundred yards off.’ He pointed with his finger, and the carriage drove on. Both the ladies were silent, wrapped in their own thoughts. The bailiff’s house was a pretty one. It was built of red brick with white stone copings; it had a nice orchard on one side, and a poultry-yard on the other, and over the door climbed a splendid pear-tree. No one was to be seen, for Dolly and Eliza were as usual groping about the ruins. Uncle Vincent was away superintending the removal of furniture, and Mrs. Vincent was making up accounts in the back parlour, which looked out on the farmyard. The footman rang the bell, and after a little a scared maid appeared, whose wits, scattered by the sad events of the previous night, had not yet returned to their habitual calm of stupidity.

‘Madam—Mrs. Vincent—Mr. Carrol—oh, yes, they’re all at home,’ she stammered. ‘Please will you walk in here?’

Miss Fenchurch directed the coachman to put up at the nearest inn, and then the two ladies entered the house. Lady Fenchurch’s heart beat violently. She dreaded any horrible sight, and was not quite sure whether she cared enough for Dick to endure his mangled, perhaps bleeding, appearance. He had been so handsome; how if the beauty had disappeared, and given place to loathsome ugliness. How should she dare to look?

The little maid showed them into the front parlour, fitted with glossy old oak cupboards and tables. Miss Fenchurch went into ecstasy over their polished surfaces and handsome carving, while Evelyn thoughtfully smelled at a bunch of roses and mignonette stuck in a brown jug in the centre of the table. Presently the maid returned, ushering in a nurse.

‘You want to see Mr. Carrol, ladies?’ she said. ‘I fear it is impossible. He is unconscious.’

‘Just for one minute,’ said Lady Fenchurch pleadingly; ‘just for one minute let us see him.’

The nurse hesitated. This handsome young lady was no doubt some relation or cousin or a sweetheart. The presence of a pretty woman could not hurt him, especially as he took no notice of what was going on around him, and it would please her.

‘Very well, then,’ she said; ‘I will risk it, but you must promise not to speak or make any noise.’

‘I promise;’ and therewith leaving Miss Fenchurch to a further contemplation of the old oak they mounted the stairs. The sick room was shaded, and only a gentle light filtered through the green Venetian blinds. In the bed lay Dick pale as death, and motionless. A smell of ether and lavender-water floated in the air, but there was nothing terrible or frightening. Dick’s face was perfectly calm. He might have been asleep. Evelyn breathed more freely. She little knew how much she had dreaded till her fears were relieved. She drew near, and gently put her lips to the cheek which lay wearily on the white pillow. As she did so the invalid moved and murmured softly, ‘Luce.’

She started back as if stung by a viper, while the nurse remarked with satisfaction: ‘That is the first time he has spoken yet—he is getting better.’

Lady Fenchurch gave another look, a half-frightened, half-angry look, towards the bed.

'Let us go down, nurse; there is a smell of ether in the room. I can't bear it.'

The nurse opened the door quietly, thinking to herself that it was a pity young ladies should be so sensitive; she never minded the smell, or, indeed, far worse odours.

'There, now, my dear, you're as white as a ghost,' said Miss Fenchurch, when she returned to the little parlour. 'I knew it would upset you to see the poor young man, and in bed too. People always look worse in bed.'

'You were right and I was wrong,' said Evelyn in a faint voice, sinking into a chair. 'Let us go home.'

'What? without seeing the Vincents and the ruins. I thought we came partly to see the ruins; I am much interested to observe the ravages of the fire—I am sure it was caused by the housemaids' candles, they are so careless.'

'Very well.' Evelyn resigned herself feebly to the consequence of her own imprudence.

'You do not require my services any further,' said the nurse, who was still standing in the aperture of the door, with her hand on the lock. 'I should like to return to my patient. Just now he showed some signs of consciousness.'

'No, my good woman, you can go—at least—you must first tell us what you think of him. Is he likely to recover?'

Evelyn sat by stonily. She did not even lift her eyes at the question.

'It's impossible to say. If he takes nourishment, and if he keeps quiet, he may do. But we are afraid of internal injuries.'

'Internal injuries!' echoed Evelyn despairingly; 'how terrible!'

'Yes, ma'am; and it's a wonder he escaped with his life at all. He was dreadfully burnt, and all shattered to pieces like.'

'Have you often had a case like this before?' asked Miss Fenchurch, moved by female curiosity to discuss the case as one of pathological interest.

'Not exactly, but I've had a good deal to do with burns and accidents.'

'We are keeping nurse, and she ought to return to her patient,' observed Evelyn.

'Yes, of course; but, nurse, you're not afraid of delirium, are you?'

'No, ma'am. He seems quiet enough—quite child-like, I may say.'

'Well, take great care of him, his life is very valuable. He is the master of Long Leam, you know.'

‘So I understand,’ and the nurse, pursing her lips, withdrew quietly.

‘And what do you mean to do now, Rachel?’ said Lady Fenchurch, rousing herself from the apathy into which she seemed to have fallen.

‘Mrs. Vincent will be here directly, and we must offer her assistance; this little house must be most inconvenient for so large a party. What do you say to asking them all over to Oakdene?’

‘What! those tiresome girls, Dolly and Eliza? I could not stand them.’

‘They are very much like other girls, I think, and seem quiet and ladylike——’

‘They are fearfully dull—fancy having those girls on one’s hands all day.’

‘Well, they will learn to employ themselves. I cannot see any great hardship in that——’

‘And that dreadful Mr. Vincent.’

‘He will be *your* uncle soon if the poor young man recovers. Hush!’ Miss Fenchurch drew herself up primly. ‘Here comes Mrs. Vincent.’

CHAPTER LIV.

MRS. VINCENT MEDITATES.

MRS. VINCENT entered with her cap-strings flying and an air of unwonted gloom and solemnity. ‘How kind of you to come,’ she said, ‘into this house of mourning!’

‘I suppose the insurance is all right?’ put in Miss Fenchurch quickly.

‘I *hope* so, but one never knows. That beautiful house, Miss Fenchurch—that fine old mansion that we were all so fond of—burnt to the ground! The ways of Providence are past finding out.’

‘And the housemaids!’ ejaculated Miss Fenchurch. ‘Oh! those housemaids!—are you convinced the fire did not originate in dropping lucifer matches?’

‘Very probably, but——’

‘Or with lighted papers thrown into the fireplace? That is another dangerous habit. I write up warnings in all the bedrooms.’

‘Rachel, what does it matter *how* the fire originated? The question is what to do now?’

'Yes ; can we offer you beds?—we have no one at home, you know, but ourselves.'

'Thanks. There is poor young Dick ; my duty is to the unfortunate lad——'

'But your husband and daughters?'

'Ah, Dolly and Eliza—they must go home—they must learn to submit to the decrees of Providence. I shall arrange for them to start to-morrow.'

'What a head for organization you must have !' said Miss Fenchurch admiringly.

Mrs. Vincent smiled a sad little self-conscious smile. 'I have been told so.'

'And you are an admirable nurse, I am sure.'

'I have nursed all my family. And who is there that has not been ill and can look forward to perpetual good health?'

'Very true.' Miss Fenchurch sighed also.

Evelyn, whom this colloquy exasperated, said, 'We had better not detain Mrs. Vincent now, Rachel, if we can do no more for her, and she has all her arrangements to make.'

'But you will see the ruins first—oh yes, you must, please. My girls are always there—children, you know, perfect children, and yet so accomplished. If you will come with me you need not be incommoded by any crowd—they all know *me*.'

Therewith Mrs. Vincent rang for the half-scared maid, who in all her time of service with the quiet bailiff's wife (who of her own accord was now relegated to the kitchen premises) had never seen such goings on and such a quantity of fine folk, and laid upon her such numerous and urgent injunctions about hot water, luncheon, the making of beef-tea and lemonade, that the poor girl's wits almost forsook her again. Then, gathering up her mantle and a garden hat, she sallied forth to pilot her guests. Mrs. Vincent was a very important person now, and the respectful bows and greetings of the work-people they met amply denoted it. As long as the young master lay ill and dying, and Mr. Vincent scarcely realized his position, every duty and responsibility devolved upon his wife, and admirably she responded to them. She was happier than she had been for many a long day, walking about the smoking ruins and giving orders to the nurse in the shaded sick-room. Presently they met Dolly and Eliza, their hands full of calcined stones and queer-shaped bits of glass and lead. 'We have found such strange things,' they exclaimed simultaneously, 'and over there they are digging out all manner of funny twisted bits of iron, and books and glass as black as coal—do come, mamma !'

The girls were quite excited. They felt like Robinson Crusoe on his desert island. Flurried with happy expectation and surprise, they had quite forgotten their company manners, left their gloves behind, and looked for the nonce two joyous, sunburnt, simple English girls.

'Dolly ! Eliza !' said their mother, 'take these ladies and show them everything. Where is your father ?—find him.'

'Papa is in the stables ; he is talking to the grooms about the narrow escape the horses had.'

'There, that will do ; don't chatter, and behave properly,' added Mrs. Vincent ; 'and when you have *quite* satisfied your curiosity, Lady Fenchurch, I hope you will come back to lunch.'

'Thank you, no,' said Evelyn, a little proudly—war was secretly accepted between these two women—they already mutually disliked and feared each other ; 'we must be going home.'

'But we will come to take the last news of your dear and interesting patient before we drive off,' said Miss Fenchurch, with her old-fashioned maidenly punctiliousness.'

'Dear and interesting patient,' mumbled Mrs. Vincent to herself, as she hurried back to the bailiff's little house. 'Will he live or will he die ?—that is the question. I wish I knew. I wish I could gather some definite notion of the safest line of conduct. Those women scent something ; they mean mischief. They are after him, I believe, and the young one looks as if she wouldn't be trifled with ; as for the other, of course she's an old goose.'

Mrs. Vincent knew nothing of Evelyn's short visit to the sick-room, and the nurse never told her, thinking very properly that she had rather transgressed directions in admitting a stranger. Had Mrs. Vincent known this, she would have descried even more danger in the subtly veiled politeness of the ladies' invitation to Oakdene. She was considerably disturbed, too, by the absence of the pearl necklace, which in setting to rights her dressing-case she discovered to be missing ; but she dared not proclaim her loss, and only trusted that the obnoxious jewel had perished in the flames, and thus extricated her from any further dilemma.

Mrs. Vincent walked softly into the sick-room. The nurse had gone to her dinner. There was no one present but the invalid, and he lay with his eyes shut as if he were dead. Was he dead ? Perhaps. Mrs. Vincent stooped and laid her hand on his forehead, as softly as Evelyn had laid her lips, but there was no love in her touch. The sick man seemed to feel it, he moved

and moaned while her hard, cold eyes looked critically at him. Why couldn't he die when he was maimed and mangled, already a semi-corpsé? He would not feel death now; its bitterest pangs were past, and his removal might do such good to her children. The doctor scarcely expected him to live; everything would be smooth and natural if he were gone. She need have no secret to keep then, be tortured by no fears lest he should discover her deceit and revenge it.

Why shouldn't that pale figure grow paler and whiter, and the heart stop, and the spirit fly away—where? Oh, that was not her business; but she loved her children, and in a kind of contemptuous way, the drunken husband too, and Dick's death would be their gain. The leaves of the wide-spreading pear-tree flapped gently against the window, the summer breeze swept through the crevices of the blind, and Dick lay motionless. His life hung there by a thread, trembling in the balance of eternity. A small sedative, a few drops of an opiate, and he would never awaken more. No one could call it a crime, rather it seemed a mercy to spare the poor wretch the agony of convalescence or the worse pains of prolonged death. What will not a woman do when she is tempted by herself? That self, that venal monitor, persuades more surely than lies in the power of any external influence. The head speaks more surely and to more purpose than the heart. While Mrs. Vincent wrought her vague wishes into firm intentions, the door opened softly, and the nurse entered, rosy from her dinner. She looked doubtfully at Mrs. Vincent; is not the soul visible in the countenance? Then glanced towards the bed.

'Our dear patient is better, I think,' said Mrs. Vincent, in her cold, dry voice, 'but he seems inclined to be quiet. You had better let him sleep.'

CHAPTER LV

FOOLISH LONGINGS.

LUCE stood with clasped hands in the shadow of the window-curtain. She wanted to be alone, for she felt her heart breaking. That morning she had heard the news. Long Leam was a heap of cinders, and Dick lay dying. Dying! impossible. She could only see him as he looked when they parted, so happy, so young, so beautiful, with such a spell of pleasant years to run

out before him. Those bright blue eyes, that graceful figure, so tall and strong, with the confidence of youth straightening its lithe gait, crushed, mangled, shapeless. Ah, it could not be. She twisted her handkerchief between her hands and bit her lips till the blood came. All the love she had tried to stifle in her heart broke forth like a long-dammed torrent. In sickness, in death, he seemed nearer to her. She was almost mad with longing, she hungered so for one little glimpse of the poor broken body, to whom perhaps she could bring relief. If he must die, why could she not be with him, minister to his wants, turn his pillow, give him to drink? No one knew what he liked so well as she did. But she was nothing to him now, nothing, not half so much as his faithful old terrier or the servant that nursed and sat up with him. And it was all her own doing, all her own, no one to blame but herself. An agonized yearning stole over her. Perhaps he could be saved; if anyone *could* save him, she would. Again she clenched her hands. She remembered Lady Eleanor and the proprieties. She was hemmed in on all sides by her own actions, and by the sphere in which she was placed. Something whispered to her she had done right, and then in another instant she said to herself passionately that there was no such thing as right, that love was everything, that love was too sacred, too precious, to be lightly cast away. He had not loved *her* much perhaps, but she had loved him, he had laid his kisses on her lips, he had pressed her in his arms. And, though tortured by jealousy, burning with hopeless, unrequited affection, she had yielded up these things to another. And where was that other, was she by his side, sitting patiently as beehived woman, cooling his fevered head, wiping away the death-sweat, holding his hand, passing with him through the last dread hours, or was she nursing her own fears, and leaving him to hired cares? Luce knew what would be Mrs. Vincent's tender mercies, she could gauge the depths of *her* pity. If he were consigned to *that*! Luce started up. Perhaps he was alone and wanted her. She would go, so gladly, she asked nothing but just to be near him. The rolling carriages outside, hurrying to their business and their pleasure, insatiable in their voracity for frivolous amusement, recalled her to a sense of reality. Dick would die, and she would never see him again. People would ring out his praises, talk of him for an hour, pity him, and then he would be forgotten. It was terrible to die so young, and to be forgotten. She leant against the window-curtain, looking out with hollow glassy eyes at the street below. More people, gaily

moving—they did not care, no one cared except the little girl up there in the bedroom, her white face staring into space, who was parted from him.

‘Luce!’ called Maud’s gay voice beside her, Maud whom no misadventures daunted. ‘Luce, are you not coming down? I have so much to tell you.’

‘I don’t want to hear it.’ Luce put her fingers in her ear.

‘Nonsense! don’t be stupid. I’m going to be married at last.’

‘Married!’ The word seemed to Luce to have no meaning; wedding-cake, and favours, and pretty presents were incongruous and distasteful, while Dick lay dying.

‘Yes, of course, why shouldn’t I? Arthur Sterney has proposed at last, and he has promised to give up the burlesque actresses, and live nicely and economically, and his old aunt is going to pay his debts. She always said he had the best of hearts, only his head was not quite so good.’

‘What is the use of a heart?’

‘Use of a heart? well, it makes a man kind and generous. Arthur means to give me lovely presents; a good-hearted man always gives presents.’

‘And if he breaks your heart, what will you do?’

‘Bless you, child, my heart is not easily broken; it has certainly been cracked a few times, but I’ve had it strongly riveted. I have no fear. I am quite equal to most men, and have studied their natures profoundly. They are not, like us, swayed by no end of motives, impenetrable and mixed motives; you can generally trace a man’s actions to their root—himself. Now if you’ve only got the root you can easily plant and water and make it grow. Man-gardening is as easy as window-gardening; give them plenty of scope, deep earth, you know, and don’t be impatient or always pulling them up by the roots to see why the flower doesn’t come, and you will easily reap the fruits.’

‘The flower is love, I suppose?’

‘No—I don’t think so; love is rather more of a weed. It grows rankly, and in solitary places; now you——why, Luce! you’ve been crying, and you’ve got a dug-up look about you. Surely you’re not fretting about that man still?’

‘Hush! he is dying,’ said Luce, with warning uplifted finger.

‘Dying! poor fellow! I suppose you’re very miserable?’

‘Very.’ Luce hid her face in Maud’s dress. Even so luke-warm a friendship comforted her at that instant.

‘And I dare say now you are filled with some Quixotic kind of notion that you would like to go and nurse him?’

Luce hung her head.

‘And, of course, save his life, and make him eternally grateful. I know the sort of thing. My dear, that kind of melodramatic nonsense only does for the stage.’

‘Think, just think—if he is dying?’

‘Luce, you surprise me. With all your quiet and mouse-like ways, you have a great deal of poetry in you; and yet, when you had the chance of marrying this man, you deliberately threw it away.’

‘Oh! cannot you understand?’ sobbed Luce. ‘I loved him so, that I wanted him to be noble. I thought my love would raise him to the height I fancied he could reach. Ah! I see it now; it was all visionary, and stupid, and high-strung; and he is just dying, and I am here, helpless and alone.’

‘Well! I confess I cannot conceive your kind of love; but I do see you are unhappy, dear; what can I do for you?’

Maud spoke kindly, and her commonplace words soothed Luce undefinably. When nature asserts her claim, when souls are really stirred, there runs a kind of sympathetic chain from one to the other; but yet we never absolutely touch each other at all points. There remain depths hidden from the subtlest divining, and chords that can never be struck; so that when we suffer most, we are always really and spiritually alone. Yet the magic of a kindly touch, the affinity of a presence, the tremble of a voice, speak to us of happiness, and raise our drooping spirits to a possibility of better things. It is in this that the communion of friends is truly beneficial; we idealise their comprehension; we misconstrue their grasp of the truth, and even our mistakes serve to heal our sorrowing hearts.

‘What can I do?’ repeated Maud.

‘Oh! if you could persuade my aunt to return to Highview! there we should be nearer him, more able to know, and perhaps to help.’

‘Well, Luce, to show you I am not ill-natured, now that I am engaged to be married, and don’t so much care for London (I shall have plenty of time to choose my dresses), I will urge our return. Your aunt is usually good-tempered to-day. I suppose you would like to go home at once?’

Luce nodded her head.

‘I will try what I can do,’ said Maud encouragingly, as she left the room.

She did try her best, and soon came back with Lady Eleanor’s

affirmative answer. The season was nearly over, Lady Eleanor opined, Maud's engagement had reached a satisfactory termination ; and as to Luce, there seemed very little reason to suppose that town or country would make any difference to her prospects ; so they might go as soon as they pleased, she added. Luce and Maud started first, and arrived at Highview only a few days after the fire at Long Leam. Maud lent herself amiably to Luce's desires, and the two girls concocted quite a little plot together. They were to drive into West Thorpe at the earliest opportunity in Luce's small pony cart, and, under pretext of shopping, to remain there a couple of hours while they sent a messenger to Long Leam to make inquiries about Mr. Carrol's health. Maud enjoyed anything in the shape of intrigue heartily, and Luce was too utterly downcast and wretched to care for aught but the dribble of news she might by this means obtain. They were thus agreed ; and Luce, with the prospect of certain intelligence before her, ventured to feel a little happier.

The next few days were uneventful enough. They dared not drive to West Thorpe every day for fear of attracting attention, and each report of the invalid seemed more discouraging.

'It is a slow kind of thing, you know, when you're all smashed up as that poor creature is,' Maud tried to assure her friend ; 'one mustn't expect progress. Every day he *lives* is a day gained.'

'Ought one even to wish for life if he suffers so?' said Luce despondingly.

'Well, that depends. I suppose everyone values life, even the cripples and the deaf and dumb.'

'It would be terrible for him to be a cripple,' said Luce as they drove down the leafy lanes ; 'I can never imagine him except in the fullest health and spirits.'

'Ah ! that's it, and people always pity you far more if you have enjoyed good health all your life, while the poor invalid gets no sympathy because he has already suffered so much. It's a queer world, that's what it is, and most things are topsy-turvy in it.'

'I can imagine this world so beautiful, that it might seem like paradise.'

'You mean if one has just the things one wishes for, but nobody has. Look at me, now, I'm quiet content, and think myself lucky to get Arthur Sterney for a husband ; and yet, what with his debts and his duns, and the way in which he is

bored, unless he finds constant amusement, you wouldn't think him such a very desirable husband after all.'

'Why do you marry him, then?' asked Luce, idly flicking a fly off the pony's back with her whip.

'You really need not ask such ridiculous questions. You know perfectly well that there are more women than men in the world ; that to those of us poor creatures who can't emigrate as housemaids, or set up as lady doctors, there is very little scope given ; and, my dear, I think that girl is not so great a fool who makes the best of life, even if it is not very good, as her friend who stands out for sympathy and love and all the paraphernalia of sentiment.'

Luce quivered. Her companion's philosophy cut deep into her heart, and there were times when she said to herself that the children of this world were at least wise in their generation. They knew positively what they wanted, and they strove for it, if not nobly, at least perseveringly—the secret of success.

Presently Maud spoke again.

'You get paler and thinner every day, Luce ; if you don't take care you will be ill too. Can't you rouse yourself ? Find some occupation. I know you don't care for dress or gossip as I do, but your music need not be quite neglected.'

'Never mind me,' said Luce, with a new touch of fretful impatience. 'Do you think she is with him ?'

They had gleaned but little information from the messenger, who only saw the bulletin at the door, which said Mr. Carrol was no better, and gave no other details. Luce would fain have known how Dick slept, who was with him, and every little item of sick-room tittle-tattle.

'I should think not !' answered Maud composedly. 'Remember she is a widow, and will probably take very good care of her reputation now, as she risked it once. Unless she announces her engagement to him, which would shock all the good people, how can she nurse a young man—what reason can she give ?'

The good sense of Maud's remarks left Luce no pretext for demur, and she accustomed herself to think of Dick as alone. Presently, by one of the illogical leaps that love occasionally makes, she imagined herself with him, and was able to piece together fragments of the conversation they might hold.

Mr. Highview, coming in from his ride one evening, gave form and stability to her cogitations. It was generally assumed in the family that Luce, having given her lover his *cong  *, could

not care for him, and that his affairs might therefore be discussed with impunity in her presence.

People will judge our private feelings and prejudices in this manner, according to their conception of probability.

'Very sad about young Carrol, I must say!' he remarked, pouring himself out a cup of tea.

'What has happened?' said Lady Eleanor languidly. 'I suppose he will not lose much; the house must have been well insured.'

'He may lose his life though—I don't expect *that* was insured.'

'His life!' Luce sat with parted lips, breathless.

'He is as bad as possible. I hear Pilule telegraphed to-day to London for a physician; they can't keep the fever down.'

'I believe Mrs. Vincent is an excellent nurse,' said Lady Eleanor. 'I know she attended ambulance classes, and boasted to everybody how well she could put on a bandage.'

'Well, I suspect this is a little beyond her capacity.'

'Is Mrs. Vincent his only nurse?' asked Maud, responding to a pleading look from Luce.

'I believe so; she will look after him, I expect. A fine managing woman, though she didn't behave quite well about the affair of the necklace. But women are always so prejudiced; and, besides, she could not go against her husband.'

'Why, his death would be her gain,' said Maud hotly. 'I don't see how you can expect her *really* to care, and to take much trouble.'

'Oh! my dear,' reproved Mr. Highview, 'she is too high-minded not to do her duty.'

'Mrs. Vincent is very fond of her own interests,' persisted Maud.

'Now, my dear, what you say there is really shocking; why should we suspect Mrs. Vincent of these unnatural thoughts?'

'She has thin lips, and flat bandeaux of greasy hair; I always mistrust people with those peculiarities.'

Lady Eleanor laughed. 'Maud, you put things so funnily,' she said.

'Well, I pity poor Dick Carrol while he is in her clutches. I declare, as I am his cousin, I think I will go over and offer my services as nurse. I am sure he would prefer my soft blundering hands to her bony claws.'

In the general derision Maud's announcement caused, Luce escaped to her room. Hot tears sprang to her eyes, and the pain she was enduring seemed more and more intolerable.

CHAPTER LVI.

MISS FENCHURCH PREPARES FOR COMPANY.

LADY FENCHURCH did not repeat her visit to Long Leam. Whenever Miss Fenchurch broached the subject Evelyn seemed to shrink within herself.

‘But, really, it is rather heartless of us not to go and inquire, and the weather is so fine, too,’ said the old maid regretfully.

‘We can telegraph or write. That will do.’

‘For your intended husband?’

‘As I must not announce to the world that he is my intended husband, I cannot see that it matters; besides he is semi-delirious, he cannot know.’

‘Well, I think we might call to inquire without risk of being considered intrusive,’ murmured Miss Fenchurch, ‘and I really cannot understand you; you were so keen, at one time, to visit Mr. Carrol, when, myself, I thought it a little indecorous.’

Evelyn kept silence.

‘Is not that true, my dear?’

‘Perhaps, but I wish you would not worry me.’ She shivered. ‘I think I have got a chill.’

‘I am afraid you sat out too late in the garden last evening, and you would not put on your shawl.’

‘The moon was lovely, and it is really only pleasant in the evening. What did you tell me Mr. Peter Fenchurch wrote to you about?’

‘I will read you his letter at once,’ and herewith the old maid promptly displayed a piece of paper.

‘You see he writes from London; he says he has been travelling in America, and only just received the news of my poor brother’s death. He writes very properly, very properly indeed, considering that I do not believe he ever saw my poor brother. Ah, well, if this dear place must go to a stranger I am at least glad that he should be a person of nice feeling.’

‘He ought to be very glad; he will be rich and master of this place.’

‘Yes, my dear; and I think we ought to receive him kindly.’

‘Is he coming here?’

‘Well, he says he should like to pay his respects to me; we can scarcely refuse that.’

‘And will he bring his wife and his large family?’

‘No. It seems from his letter that his wife is dead, and he does not speak of any children.’

'He is elderly, I suppose?'

'Oh, yes, he must be elderly, for I remember Hilary telling me he came to Eton just as Hilary left Cambridge. There could not be more than ten years between them.'

'I dare say he is a tiresome and uninteresting person.'

'I don't quite see why you should say that, dear; he must have some of the family characteristics about him.'

'And then of course he will be excellent,' put in Evelyn, mockingly.

'Well, my dear, at any rate we must prepare for his reception.'

'Oh, I dare say he will be satisfied with a cutlet and a glass of sherry if he has been travelling in wilds where he never got a letter. He can't be very particular.'

'Which day shall I ask him?' said Miss Fenchurch, swelling with housewifely responsibility.

'Whenever you like. I am always here, you know. I am in mourning, so I can't go out.'

Miss Fenchurch meekly accepted the ungracious permission, and, ruffled by the small excitement of receiving a strange guest, and yet one who would be near to her in various close and unpleasant ways, retired to the library to write her letter in the quiet of deep and mature consideration. It would not do to seem too eager, and yet she wished to be cordial; her dignity must not be forgotten, and yet a little curiosity might fairly be allowed to peep out. So Miss Fenchurch sat in solemn propriety, concocting her letter and learnedly trying the nibs of quill-pens upon her thumb-nail in order to find one of the requisite degree of softness. Lady Fenchurch, meanwhile paced the garden in all the heat of noontide, shielded only by her white parasol and utterly regardless of the sun's power.

'That girl, that little plain girl,' she murmured, between her teeth, 'to think that her name should be on his lips when he was lying there ill and helpless!' Lady Fenchurch's *amour propre* was deeply wounded. Could it be that he had only offered her his hand out of pity? The loving days by the river when they glided in the little boat over the rippling waters in a peaceful haze of happiness, and thought of nothing but their own enjoyment, seemed so far away; the tragedy of her life had obscured those memories, and made her more cold and more practical. Yet if he really only pitied and had ceased to love her. It was intensely humiliating. No, she would not go back and simulate tenderness, and bear disappointment any more, until she knew the truth. How could little plain Luce, for whom she had always felt a kind of contemptuous

pity, gain any real hold on his affections? It was simply because he was fickle and changeable and selfish, like all men. She began to look about for a way to extricate herself from the engagement (she instinctively knew that he would be too manly ever to seek to release himself), and she found none. She could not give up an iota of her wealth and her comforts, or resign herself to the narrow life which would satisfy her sister-in-law, and unless she married Dick she saw no other outlet. True, with her youth and beauty she might captivate some eligible person in the years to come, but she was too prudent to risk the substance for the shadow. It was better to wait. Only one thing was impossible, to go again and sit by that bedside and hear the sick man's mumblings. Even the proposed visit of Mr. Peter Fenchurch, dull and tiresome as he might be, would prove a certain variety, and give her a valid excuse for remaining at home. She amused herself by speculating a little on Mr. Peter Fenchurch's feelings when arriving one morning at the post-office he found the letter conveying to him the news that his elderly relation was dead, and dying had bequeathed to him the greater part of his fortune. Such an experience must be exceedingly delightful. No such sweet surprise could ever come to her; she was an orphan, a penniless woman, and the widow of a man who by his testamentary arrangements had even sought to blacken her character. She walked a little faster, and felt a sharp satisfaction in crunching the gravel beneath her feet. It seemed as if she were stamping out her vindictiveness and burying it in the silent dust.

Miss Fenchurch, on the contrary, having at last indited her letter, proceeded to examine the linen-cupboards in company with the housemaid. She wished, as she expressed it, that Mr. Peter Fenchurch should find everything in perfect order, and be surprised at the quality of her housekeeping. By her brother's will she was entitled to everything she required in the shape of linen and plate, but the remainder must be left in such a condition that the carping eye could find no fault. The best china too she dusted lovingly with her own hands. There were quantities of it, all put away in cupboards, for it had never been the fashion to expose china deliberately to the chances of clumsy handling or to the dangers of modern *étagères* and brackets. The china was carefully washed once a year, and in the interim reposed luxuriously on the deep shelves of the vast closets, where it was seen by no mortal, and could therefore be destroyed by no sacrilegious touch.

'Everything is right now, I think,' said Miss Fenchurch,

with a sigh. 'There is not a fresh chip or a single crack in any of the cups, and I don't notice a leaf or a flower off the old Chelsea figures. Ah, Jane, if Mr. Peter Fenchurch should not care for china. What a calamity that would be!'

'It would indeed, ma'am, but I think most gentlefolks is partial to queer-shaped things; them dragons now, I suppose their beauty is their ugliness.'

'Certainly,' responded Miss Fenchurch, 'they are very valuable Nankin china, and you must know that in the time of Queen Anne people of the highest quality approved only of monsters.'

'Dear me, ma'am,' said Jane, whose knowledge of history was a little vague, and who was not very sure whether Queen Anne lived before or after the Deluge. She was rather inclined to believe it was after, having heard something about antediluvian monsters in a hurried visit paid to the Crystal Palace on Bank Holiday, 'dear me, but then that was a very long time ago.'

'Yes, indeed. Now, Jane, shut the cupboards, and gave me the keys of the presses. I think I will go round and pay a visit to the dairy. Perhaps Mr. Peter may be a judge of butter and cheese. I am told, in America they make tons of cheese, and send it over to England to be sold as Cheshire and Gruyère.'

CHAPTER LVII.

THE OLD BUTLER MAKES A DISCOVERY.

THE old butler prized his discovery highly. He locked up the necklace in the plate-chest, where it was secure from thieves; and he took it out occasionally to look at it and see that it had not made wings for itself and flown away. He chuckled audibly, as he thought how pleased the young master would be to see it, and what a thunderbolt would fall upon Mrs. Vincent when it was generally known that the necklace which had caused his poor dear young master so much unhappiness had been all the while safely locked away in his aunt's dressing-case.

'The wiper!' muttered the old man, as he cleaned his plate; 'what she must ha' been made of to torment a poor young man like that, to lie and to cheat. Well, I'll be even with her,' and the old man, who had never forgiven Mrs. Vincent for her petty economies, and for her accusation regarding the sherry, rejoiced greatly as he thought of the humiliation in store for her.

But as the days went by, and every time he asked to see his young master he was told that it was impossible, for in his precarious condition *no one* must be admitted to the room, he ceased to sing over his work, dropped his chuckling, and finally had a morose fit; strange, dark thoughts oppressed him. He owned little regard for Mrs. Vincent; he believed her capable of almost anything; and he began to suspect foul play. This sick-chamber, so hermetically closed that not even an old servant might penetrate its mysteries; the hired nurse, who, however skilled, could not be supposed to entertain much affection; the weird stories of violence and delirium that filtered through shut doors increased and intensified his suspicions. Cups of beef-tea and bottles of brandy certainly returned empty from the patient's room, but who could tell that any of the nourishment had reached him? The butler had read his Dickens to some purpose, and remembered Mrs. Gamp.

He grew feverishly anxious ('the young master,' with his wild, careless, generous ways, had obtained a strange hold over the hearts of his dependants); he listened at doors, he got up in the middle of the night to catch a sound or a muffled cry, and hour by hour he became more and more convinced that something uncanny was going on. He tried to get the half-

scared maid-servant into his confidence, but she was too scared to understand, and only answered 'Yes, sir,' to all his queries. In despair, he sat down to think who could help him in this dilemma; at last he remembered Bruce, whose name had been kept prominently forward in the election, and determined to summon him to his assistance. This required to be performed in a somewhat roundabout fashion, for no one in the house was acquainted with his address; and several days elapsed before he could obtain it from Mr. Highview, the only person he could think of as possessing the desired information. When at last he despatched the telegram, which began by presenting his humble duty, continued with the urgent request for Mr. Bruce's presence, and ended by a mysterious intimation that something suspicious was going on, the old man had expended the sum of two shillings, and had fairly mystified and alarmed the student.

When Bruce read in the paper the paragraph specially pointed out to him by his landlady, who took the deepest interest in all the places and people with whom he was connected, he had at once telegraphed to Dick condoling with him, and asking if he could be of any assistance. Receiving no answer, and being at that moment particularly engaged in hunting up an old authority on some small point of old usage, he concluded that Dick was well, busy, and did not require his services. When Mrs. Flinks again brought him the paper, and bade him notice the rumour of Dick's severe illness, he began to grow alarmed, and the butler's telegram received at that instant confirmed his worst fears.

He lost no time in answering, and, hastily stuffing a few things into a bag, took the next train to West Thorpe. It was evening when he arrived; the lights were burning in the sleepy little town; and a solitary fly waited for the arrival of the train. The horse was old and weak-kneed, the driver a fossil, and the vehicle shaky and mouldering; yet Bruce was heartily glad to find even so unsatisfactory a conveyance. The seven miles seemed an eternity. the night was dark and damp, light rain was falling, the hedges looked like black walls, and he had only his thoughts for company. They were not cheerful. He scarcely knew what to expect. Whether Dick would be alive or dead, or, worse still, in a sad condition of mind. To him, bodily ill seemed nothing compared with the lucidity of the intellectual powers. The saddest sight on earth, he thought, was the ravings of a man in delirium or the dodderings of feeble imbecility. Into which of these states could Dick have fallen? could the mysterious warning

of the old butler be meant to convey that the unfortunate young fellow, in a moment of frenzy, had attempted to commit suicide ?

Such were Bruce's dreary ponderings while the driver walked his horse up every small hill along the road, and spared the horse down every incline, so that it was very late when at last they reached the bailiff's house. The driver, seeing a light at the back door, halted there. The rain dripped from the eaves, and a big puddle intercepted the entrance ; but at the sound of wheels the door opened noiselessly, and the old butler appeared, fully dressed, with a candle in his hand.

'Ah, sir, thank God !' he said, 'you've come ; now all is well ; you will be able to do more than I can. I am only a poor old man and a servant, but I feel love, sir, and dutifullest respect to the young master ; and ah, sir, I have wished for you ! Let me pay the fly, sir ; don't you trouble, but step in here.'

'In here' was the pantry where the old man had carefully ranged his plate on the few shelves it contained ; and, the evening being damp, had lit a small fire, and placed a kettle on the hob.

Bruce walked in as he was desired, and warmed his hands at the fire. He was a little chilled by the long drive and his own anxiety, and he found the cosy blaze most welcome. The old butler, having dismissed the fly, now entered and bustled about, talking all the time.

'Here, sir, I've got some sherry and sandwiches for you. I expected you to-night, and, thinks I, the poor gentleman will be hungry ; and now you've come, please God, Mister Dick will soon be well again.'

'I do not understand.' To satisfy the old man, Bruce took a seat, and proceeded to drink some of the sherry. 'What is the matter with your master ?'

'Matter, sir ! everything is the matter ; he is shut up, so that none of us who love him can get near. That viper, that aunt of his, nurses him ; it's *my* belief *she* drinks the brandy and gives him only water, and starves him until, in short, it's down-right murder.'

'Perhaps she will not admit me.'

'She dare not refuse, sir ; you're a gentleman and master's friend, and we're only servants. She's never tired of telling us so either.'

'At any rate you must take me to him ; shall we go upstairs now ?'

‘Yes, sir—yes ; don’t let’s lose a minute. Who knows but she may be murdering him at this instant ?’

Bruce was sober and clear-headed, and he was able to make allowances for the old man’s evident fear and flurry ; yet even he could not resist the impression that there was something mysterious in this dark and silent house, where a sick person lay, unseen and unheard save by the woman who had always shown herself his enemy. He followed the old butler cautiously up the narrow wooden stairs, his guide holding the candle and letting its light fall on the heavy beams which, without careful treading, might have knocked against his head. At the top of the stairs they turned to the right, went down a small passage, stumbled up two or three stairs, and finally groped their way by the light of the flaring candle ; gusts of wind swept along nearly extinguishing it occasionally, and it seemed to Bruce once as if he felt the wings of a bat touch his face and skim past, bringing a quick current of cold air. Not a sound was to be heard but the cracking of the old woodwork and the gentle pattering of the rain against the passage window. Presently the old butler stopped before a door, put his ear to the keyhole to listen, holding his hand up as a warning to silence.

Bruce waited breathlessly ; in another instant he should know the worst. Having apparently satisfied himself that all was quiet, the butler turned the handle gently and slipped into the room, motioning Bruce to follow. A night-light burnt on the washing-stand, and a nurse slept, fully dressed, in an armchair. She woke at the entrance of the new-comers, and betrayed considerable surprise at the intrusion.

‘It is an old friend of master’s come to nurse him,’ whispered the butler ; ‘now, nurse, if you want a bit of sleep you can go and lie down.’

‘Yes, my good woman,’ said Bruce, throwing anxious glances towards the bed, where it seemed to him as if something stirred. ‘You can safely leave your patient to me ; does he take medicine ? what are your directions ?’

‘He needs nothing just now, but something to drink if he wakes ; there is the lemonade, and he won’t wake yet, I expect. He has not long taken a sleeping-draught,’ said the nurse, too much bewildered by the tone of quiet authority in which Bruce spoke, to dare to dispute his orders, and allowing herself to be led away passively in search of much-desired rest by the butler.

‘I will call you if anything is wanted,’ said Bruce reassuringly.

The butler turned to whisper to him as he went out. 'It's all right now you're here; don't you leave master, sir, on any account, and I shall feel he is safe in your hands.'

The door closed, and Bruce was alone—alone in the small dark room with his unconscious friend beginning at that instant to stir restlessly among the pillows. He approached the bed. Dick's eyes were closed, and a cold-water bandage was tied round his head. Yet he moved, and moved incessantly with the aimless wearying irritability of a fever patient. Bruce stood and looked pityingly. The fine strong young man reduced to such pitiable straits shocked him terribly.

'Dick,' he said, stooping over him, and gently arranging his pillow. The eyes did not unclose, and no shadow of memory or recognition passed over the pained features. Bruce drew a chair near the bedhead and watched more closely. What stuff could Mrs. Vincent be made of that she had never summoned any of Dick's friends? Poor fellow, it was but too evident he had not long to live. One wasted hand, the blue veins standing out strongly upon it, clutched at the counterpane, the other moved up and down beneath his head as though trying to ease the pain that tormented him.

Bruce had never watched by the sick bed of anyone he loved before. His mother, though a martyr to rheumatism, seldom kept her room, and had never required his services. He was too much of a philosopher to fear death for himself, and would gladly have given his life in the cause of science or culture, yet his pity was strangely and deeply excited by the spectacle of his friend's pain and helplessness. Once he had experienced, he remembered now to his shame, a moment of envy at the good fortune and the affection that attended Dick. Who was most to be envied now? Bruce with his same intelligence and unimpaired power of work, or this poor young fellow, the owner of wealth and estates, hopelessly consigned to sickness and death; and unconscious even of the love that noted each flicker of the eyelids. Suddenly the eyes opened wide, a vivid flush of colour came into the unshaven cheeks, the lips parted, and a voice said 'Luce.'

Bruce almost started; the sound was so hollow and unearthly and the man seemed so automatic. 'It is I, your friend Julian,' he said tenderly, taking one of the poor hot hands in his. But the eyes closed again without a ray of consciousness, and the lips muttered unintelligibly.

Bruce sighed.

From side to side Dick moved with a kind of restless rhythm,

sometimes speaking, sometimes silent, breathing heavily, his brow seemingly on fire.

Bruce tried to distinguish what he was talking about, but could not catch the words, only it seemed to him as though again and again he heard the name 'Luce' in all kinds of tones. The night passed more slowly than any night had ever passed before ; he felt no inclination to slumber, no desire to relax for one moment the almost painful strain of attention ; once or twice he presented the glass of lemonade to the invalid's lips, who drank, as he did all else, unconsciously and mechanically. And through the long slow hours, as the night-light spluttered, flared, and finally went out, and the grey dawn pierced gradually through the blinds, and threw a cold searching light around, that terrible undertone of incoherent, somnolent ravings, and mutterings, and broken whispers continued, rising and falling like the threatening surge of the sea. When morning came, Bruce saw more clearly the ravages the fever had wrought in his friend's countenance ; hollow-eyed, drawn with pain, flushed with unnatural heat, and distorted by suffering, it was hard to recognise the features of the handsome man, who had looked out on life with a gay fearlessness. As soon as it was fairly light, Mrs. Vincent came in, dressed in a loose morning robe with a cup of some liquid in her hand. When she beheld Bruce she started violently, and almost dropped the cup.

'You here ?' she said, adding almost fiercely, 'Who sent for you ?'

'I heard Dick was ill,' answered Bruce, rising and greeting her respectfully ; 'and, as he is my dearest friend, I came to nurse him.'

'Without communicating with me,' she said more defiantly. Bruce made a little bow of acquiescence. Her anger increased. 'You have been guilty of a gross impertinence ; you had better leave the house at once.'

'I regret to annoy you, madam, but I shall not leave my friend till he is better.'

'You are insolent,' she said, maddened out of all sense of self-control ; 'this is my house, and I order you to go.'

'It is Dick's bailiff's house, and he is master here ; take care, don't speak so loud, you may disturb him, and quarrels in a sick man's room are most unseemly.'

She threw a glance of hatred towards the bed.

'*He* won't hear, he doesn't know any one, he will never speak coherently again. You have come to nurse a *dead* man.'

'Possibly. All the more reason why you should not object

to my offering him the last services of which friendship is capable.'

Both believed that it was as they said, there could be no hope for Dick. The London doctor had remarked to Mrs. Vincent, as he pocketed his heavy fee, and wrapped a comforter round his neck to guard himself from the damp on his way to the station, that 'while there is life there is hope,' but she was too good a nurse not to understand that this was a polite condemnation of the patient, and she took it so. She was enraged at Bruce's pertinacity, while at the same time his self-possession, and her conviction of his learning, overawed her. She reflected that no further harm or good could be done now, and she decided to dissimulate her rage and to earn Bruce's good will by some show of attention.

'Well, if you choose to stay,' she said, a little awkwardly (graciousness was at no time Mrs. Vincent's forte), 'I suppose you had better, but you will find it very wearisome. He rambles so.'

'What nourishment do you give him?' asked Bruce, not noticing her semi-apology.

'He will take nothing but liquids, milk and a little beef-tea,' she said, holding out the cup for inspection.

'Thank you, I will see that he takes as much food as possible. You must have many duties to attend to. Leave the sick-room to me.'

'Indeed! and pray how are *you* qualified?'

'By the power of love, madam, of disinterested affection, a pharmacopœia of which I dare say you have never heard.'

Mrs. Vincent bit her thin lips. This man was not to be deceived. He was a clever antagonist, and would unravel her little web of intrigue. She more than ever regretted to be forced to leave him with Dick, and yet how could she prevent it, as he said it was not her house—yet; if it were, she added vindictively, such a fellow as he should never darken her doors.

'Do you want anything?' she asked, determined to maintain a show of authority; 'shall I order a room for you?'

'I want nothing but freedom, and servants who will obey my orders. I presume the nurse is trustworthy.'

'Yes,' muttered Mrs. Vincent meekly; she was beginning to feel the power of a strong and superior mind.

'Very well. As soon as the doctor comes, I will see him, and will then give further orders as they may be required.' He took the cup from Mrs. Vincent's unwilling hand, and motioned to her to withdraw.

She would fain have resisted, but she felt that her appearance with hair untidily fastened up, and matronly form enveloped in a loose flannel dressing-gown that had seen its best day, and already become a veteran in the cause of measles and other diseases, was more or less unattractive, and that she was placed in a humiliating position. For her next contest of strength with this calm, cold man she must find a better vantage-ground. Mrs. Vincent despised dress, and yet was forced to acknowledge that an elderly woman in a faded flannel dressing-gown lacked most of the elements of impressiveness and authority. It was not for nothing that the Greeks made stately Juno wear long and flowing robes; drapery inspires respect if it does not always command admiration.

‘Very well, I will leave him to you for the present, and when the doctor comes we will consult *together*.’ She laid great stress on the word ‘together,’ and with this Parthian shot she wisely left the room.

Bruce stood still a moment, the cup in his hand. He looked critically at its unappetizing contents, put his finger in, and tasted a few drops. ‘Very nasty!’ he thought. ‘No, I had better be on the safe side.’ Thus saying, he poured the cupful of liquid away into the slop-pail, and rang the bell with a masterful air. Dick seemed to be sleeping now, even the hot colloquy between his aunt and his friend had not disturbed him. He lay quiet, and seemed to breathe more easily. Bruce walked to the window, opened it, and gently raised the blind. The sick-room was stifling, but outside the morning broke fair and bright, a delicious fragrance of flowers and damp earth rose from the ground; the rain had ceased, and everything rejoiced in its freshness. The cabbage-roses in the little garden held glistening drops of dew in their pink petals, and the spikes of the sweetbriar hedge were studded as with diamonds. The birds twittered and sang, and in the distance a cock crowed lustily. Was it now, perhaps for the first time, that Bruce found leisure to admire a sunrise, and the gradual splendid awakening into life of sleeping nature? He gazed for some time, a new sense of pleasure stealing into his soul; a pleasure certainly not animal, but yet which had no connection with the intellectual joys he had hitherto found in books. Presently he dropped the blind and came back to the bed. Decidedly Dick was sleeping more peacefully than before, and there was the ghost of a smile upon his lips. At that instant there came a knock at the door, and a servant, putting her head in, said, ‘If you please, sir, the doctor is come.’

CHAPTER LVIII.

LAVENDER.

THE doctor pronounced his patient somewhat better, though the condition of febrile excitement he found puzzled him.

‘There is nothing in his state to produce so much fever,’ he said: ‘I cannot help thinking that it is rather connected with mental than bodily troubles. Do you know if he had any great trouble weighing on his mind?’

Bruce thought for an instant. ‘None I should say, absolutely none. He was a most fortunate man in all his circumstances.’

‘Then I can’t account for it; there must be some lesion that I know nothing about. Does he talk much; on what subjects does his mind run?’

‘He mutters and talks incessantly; but I cannot distinguish the words.’

‘Then please pay great attention to whatever you do hear, and let me know.’

‘You do not anticipate any immediate danger?’

‘Danger! There is great danger, but I anticipate no special evil consequences if we can keep up his strength and keep down the fever.’

‘I shall do my best.’

‘You are a great friend, I presume?’ said the doctor, pulling out his watch. ‘There is nothing like careful nursing; we doctors can effect but little in a case of this sort. The nurse who is here is an excellent person, but it will do her no harm to be kept up to her work by a personal friend.’

Then the doctor, who had his rounds to make and could not afford to waste precious time in pretty speeches, departed, and Bruce felt himself charged with all the onus of poor Dick’s recovery.

Mental troubles, now what could they be? Dick’s difficulties had lain hitherto chiefly in money embarrassments, but those were now removed, and at no time had such things seriously affected his spirits. It must be something far worse than this that disordered his brain and kept up an unceasing irritability. What could it be? Bruce was beginning to learn that life’s problems are far more intricate and puzzling than the severest test in mathematics. When the premises are doubtful it is not easy to argue correctly. He pondered. Just then the sleeper turned more quickly, and, as Bruce bent down closer to catch the words uttered, he distinctly heard, ‘Luce, oh my poor Luce!’

in tones of regretful anguish. 'Luce !' that had been the name then that he thought to distinguish before. 'Luce !' why should he call on her? Of course it was only the broken dream of a sick man, harking back upon the past memories of his life. Again he heard, 'Don't send me away, Luce. I am so hot and your hands are cool.' Strange recollections these ! 'Why will you be so unselfish? Let us go away—no one will know—Luce, oh Luce !' and the passionate cry died away into a low moan. Bruce sat motionless. The doctor had bidden him gather the secret ; he was merely obeying orders in Dick's own interest. 'You said I did not love you, poor little Luce.'

Bruce shrank together ; could he be justified in listening to talk of this kind ?

'And your eyes, oh, your eyes, do take them away, they burn me ; why are you so angry ? I did my best, indeed I did my best.'

Then again Dick relapsed into silence and Bruce sat by thinking. What strange lapses of mind illness brought with it ! why should Dick harp so constantly on Luce instead of dwelling rather on the perfections of Lady Fenchurch, the woman he had passionately loved ? There was some rift within the lute, some misunderstanding. It could not be Luce's fault, he felt sure. To Bruce she was a goddess who could do no wrong, and yet not a goddess merely, but the most charming and loveable of girls. He allowed himself to feel glad that Dick had not married her. They were ill-matched ; even with all Bruce's affectionate infatuation for his friend he dared not think him worthy of so precious a jewel. The days passed. Bruce saw little of Mrs. Vincent ; she came upstairs occasionally, looking cross and sour ; she suggested this and found fault with that, and went down again more convinced than ever in her own mind that Bruce's assiduity and superhuman attention would restore Dick to life. Bruce was beginning to look like a shadow himself, his hands grew more and more transparent, his face thinner, but the light in his eyes seemed to have transferred itself from within to without ; a tender watchfulness guarded every movement, a solicitous anxiety provoked every comfort. Little by little Dick grew calmer, the touch of his friend's hand seemed to soothe and please him. He slept oftener and for longer intervals, and, when Bruce scanned his face with earnest eyes it seemed to him that a flash of recognition passed over the pale features. Again he looked, and this time he felt quite sure of it. A soft sigh unclosed the lips, and faint as a breath of summer air he caught the sound.

‘ Julian, is it you ?’

‘ It is I, Dick. Thank God you are better.’

The waxen hand felt over the counterpane for his, and clasped it with the loving trust of gratitude. Then the tired head turned itself, and Dick slept again, like the wearied child that has said good-night to its mother, and made its peace with all the world. After that, every day a fresh stage towards recovery was made. Dick spoke and moved, though still languidly yet more naturally, and began to converse with his friend in quiet and cheerful tones. Bruce was genuinely overjoyed. To him it was as though he had suddenly emerged from some dark tortuous cavern into the full light of day. He had grieved so over Dick, with the thread of his bright young life snapped suddenly, and all the possibilities of development and happiness cut short, that the abrupt change in his previsions, the sudden leap from darkling fears to vivid hope, left him dazed and blinded, like a half-blind prisoner in the brilliant gleams of unaccustomed sunshine. He nursed Dick as tenderly as any woman, pressed on his dainty appetite the most delicate food, and humoured his smallest wish. His long clumsy hands, that hitherto held only voluminous folios or note-making pen and pencil, learnt a new handiness. His strength was most acceptable in lifting the poor invalid, whose weight had sadly dwindled from the day he rowed stroke-oar in the Cambridge boat, and his delicacy of touch could not have been surpassed by that of the most skilled surgeon. The nurse found her services almost dispensed with, and began to ramble about the fields and bring home bunches of wild flowers, which, after a long period of pent-up existence in a town hospital, seemed to her supernaturally beautiful.

Bruce himself rarely stirred from the sick-room. He would sit for hours reading, while Dick slept, ready to jump up at the smallest sound ; he had even deprived himself voluntarily of his pipe, lest the smell of tobacco should incommode the fastidious invalid. Not the least of his self-denial was comprised in the scarcity of books to which he cheerfully resigned himself, a volume of Alexander Barclay’s ‘ Ship of Fules ’ being the only literature he had carried away from his lodgings. Perhaps, next to the Bible, the ‘ Ship of Fules ’ is as good food for the mind of a man cast up on the dry shore of involuntary idleness as any other. Thence he can view the follies, and ugliness, and misery of the steaming hurrying waves of the world below at his ease, and moralize in the luxury of security.

The fools that get and the fools that give, the fools that lie and the fools that waste ; who has not known some and pitied others, and suffered under the remainder ? And, as the scholar pored over the pages adorned with droll and grotesque woodcuts, his spirit grew calm and resigned. Luce was his beacon-star, and only a star, intangible and afar off.

While Bruce thus steeped his mind in the sweets of study, and sought to reduce passion to its divinest element, the element of respectful worship, he noticed with surprise that Dick's recovery proceeded very slowly. The great and beneficial change that had appeared at first did not maintain itself, and seemed to give place to a stationary condition. Dick's sleep was fairly good, his appetite tolerable, and yet he did not improve. He had moments of intense and unreasonable depression ; he would turn and start and cry out in his sleep, and lie for hours with his eyes fixed on a particular spot in the wall-paper, as though he had neither strength nor inclination for more. Bruce thought again of the mental troubles, and one day he ventured to speak.

'Dick, my boy,' he said, sitting very near him and watching his face carefully, 'what is the matter with you ? Where are your old spirits ?'

'How can a fellow have any spirits after such a confounded illness as mine ? When I can use my limbs and get about I shall be all right.'

'Dick, why don't you confide in me ? Why don't you tell me your secrets ? Perhaps I could help you ; I am sure you are unhappy.'

'No, I'm only bored, and so must you be, Julian. I declare you never go out ; why don't you take a walk ?'

'You are trying to evade my question. You look troubled ; it is more than pain that worries you.'

Dick's brow puckered. He was silent a minute, then he said, 'I see I was wrong, Julian ; we can't live our own lives—and I know it now it's too late.'

'How too late ?'

'I'm an unlucky devil.' His voice grew hard and bitter. 'Everything I touch goes wrong.'

'Dick, you are a little unjust—at least, you have faithful friends.'

'I know.' Dick took Bruce's hand and wrung it. 'It's no good talking—by-the-bye, did I rave in my delirium ?—one talks such infernal nonsense at those times.'

'You did talk,' confessed Bruce, measuring out his confi-

dences with his eye on Dick, as a doctor feels his patient's pulse. 'You talk chiefly of one person——'

'Of one person——'

'By which I conclude that person was dear to you.'

'Not a bit of it ; that does not follow at all.'

'Strangely enough, her name seems to be Luce.'

Dick coloured violently. 'What a fool a man is when he is ill !'

'A fool? That is a matter of opinion. Tell me what is there between you and Miss Windermere ?'

'There is nothing. I dare say she was right ; she made me pay the penalty of my own folly ; she would not marry me, you know. I told her I did not care for her.' His tones were hurried and angry and broken, and the flush in his face continued.

'And you—love her now.' Bruce spoke with calm precision, but every word seemed like a knife cutting into his heart. His pearl, his precious one—how could he bear to talk of her thus? He was like a man in a dream assisting at his own execution.

'Yes,' Dick said dreamily, the flush dying away, 'I suppose I do. I am always thinking of her now ; she was the only unselfish woman I ever met, and I can't forget her.'

'Why don't you try ?'

'Oh, what does it matter?—if I could only see her once. Whenever I shut my eyes her face haunts me ; it is full of reproach, and, oh ! so sad ; and sometimes I think she is quite near, and she seems kind, and then I wake and it is only a delusion.'

'And then you cry out and have wakeful nights, and the fever goes on.'

'Yes,' Dick sighed, 'and there is nothing to be done. Go on reading, this is idle talk.'

Bruce closed his book, keeping one finger between the leaves. 'No, I think I will talk a little longer about these strange fancies of yours. Do you think if you saw her and could speak to her you would be happier.'

'Yes, it is funny, isn't it? You know that I am such a matter-of-fact chap, and I keep feeling as if I wanted her to forgive me. I behaved awfully bad to her.'

'Perhaps she would not like to see you.' Bruce rose and walked to the window.

'Oh, she would. I am certain she loves me still, and she is so unselfish.'

Bruce stood with his back to the bed. His lips quivered,

but he was determined to show no emotion. Dick must never guess his secret. He remained silent a moment.

‘What is the matter, Julian?’ said the voice from the bed. ‘Do you think me a fool? Why don’t you answer?’

‘I don’t think a man is a fool who loves wisely and well,’ said Julian, in somewhat shaky tones, but he did not turn his head. With a swift rush came swooping down upon him the great temptation of his life, hurrying him to a decision, holding him to his choice as being the grip of a sharp pair of pincers. He had learnt the meaning of many things, he had studied deeply in the book of history, he was now to learn the meaning of friendship, to be instructed in the deepest recoils of the human heart. He stood at the window and idly watched the girl gathering lavender sprigs in the garden. Lavender, to put away among precious stored-up things, to give a sweet odour of the bygone summer and leave a lingering memory of warmth and life. Lavender! So be it. He turned to the bed. His face was very pale, and his teeth were tightly closed. ‘Dick, my boy,’ he said, trying to speak cheerfully, ‘you musn’t be so morbid; all this will conduce to your happiness, I am sure; now lie down and try to get a sleep. To-morrow I am going for a long walk. You are nearly well now, and don’t require me.’

CHAPTER LIX.

FAITHFUL.

‘THAT is not the way,’ said Dick, as the nurse in Bruce’s absence tried to re-arrange his pillows ; ‘I like my head higher.’ He pushed feebly with his hand and sank back exhausted. ‘Never mind, that will do.’ The nurse, believing that the heat had made her patient fractious, forbore to press the matter, and retired into a corner with her sewing. The day had been sultry, black thundery clouds swept over the sky, and not a breath stirred the leaves, a sullen hush covered all things, and in Dick’s small room, even with the window wide open and the Venetian blinds closed, the air was oppressive to suffocation. He had been alone with the nurse all day ; he missed his friend’s company extremely, and cherished a kind of angry bitterness at being thus deserted. He had tried to be cheerful, but now he was only hot and tired and nervously depressed. Like the horse in his weary mill-round his thoughts ran their usual circle ; he pictured Luce to himself as she stood beside him that spring morning when they parted, with the faint sweet smell of the violets and primroses around and the dew-laden sprays touching their foreheads. His fancy ran riot, he remembered the warmth of her kisses, and the deep love in her voice. He remembered how carelessly he had accepted that great gift, and how angrily he had left her. Where was she now ; was he forgiven ? A slight rustling noise startled him, the nurse got up and went to the door, which was hidden from him by a screen.

‘Nurse, what is it ?’ he heard her return, and shut his eyes wearily, trying to keep his dream of that fair spring morning ; ‘what is it ? I don’t want anything.’

A soft cool hand was laid gently on his impatient fingers, and a breath of the sweet-scented spring air seemed wafted over him. He opened his eyes, surprised and somewhat less irritable, and met Luce’s soft and earnest glances.

‘Luce, you here, why—am I dreaming—oh ! if you are a dream—don’t leave me, don’t,’ he said, stretching out his hands.

‘I am no dream, Dick—look at me.’

Then he timidly took her hand again, feasting his starving eyes on her dear blushing face—fascinated, soothed. Forgetting all but that she was near, he drew her slowly, closer, closer,

down towards him, till her cool, fragrant lips rested on his hot, parched mouth.

‘Luce, my little love, the one unselfish woman in the world.’ Then he put her away a little and looked at her. Luce did not speak, but happiness shone in her shining glances, and love played about the sensitive corners of her smiling mouth.

‘It is too good to be true—did I summon you by wishes, dear?’

‘Mr. Bruce summoned me,’ said Luce, slipping down beside the bed on her knees, and laying her cheek bashfully on Dick’s hand. ‘I came at his request.’

‘Dear good fellow, where is he? I should like to thank him.’

‘I want no thanks,’ said Bruce, approaching from his hiding-place behind the curtain, ‘but I have something to give you.’ As he spoke he handed him a letter and a small case wrapped in white paper.

‘The necklace!’ cried Dick; ‘where was it found?’

‘Mrs. Vincent had it in her dressing-case; she stole it from you, and in rescuing her jewels from the fire you rescued it also, and saved your own reputation.’

Dick could not speak. The surprise and gratitude he felt almost choked him.

‘And this letter,’ he tore it open with feverish anxiety, read, and handed it to Bruce.

‘Free!’ he said, leaning back satisfied on his pillows; ‘thank God, *free!*’

The letter was from Lady Fenchurch, releasing him from his engagement.

‘I know,’ she said, ‘that you have ceased to love me; and, as I find Mr. Peter Fenchurch a most charming person, and he is anxious to marry me, it will be more convenient and agreeable to all if I return your word, and tell you you are free.’

Bruce read without speaking, folded the letter, and glanced towards the bed.

Luce’s little brown head lay pillowed in Dick’s arms, as he bent over her, with an expression of rapt happiness shining in his eyes. ‘My love,’ he said in a low voice, ‘my little love, kiss me; now indeed I believe in a good woman’s heart.’

Bruce turned away. He dared not break the silence of this solemn moment, but a swallow flying past the window at that instant might have seen that his face was pale, and down the haggard white cheek a great tear rolled. For he had dreamed a dream; he had conversed with a vision of infinite bliss, and

seen opening vistas of irradiating light. But the light had faded into darkness, and the angels had soared aloft as he closed for ever the glowing pages of the book of life and love, and turned himself again, a cold and solitary man, to the stern uncompromising black-letter of duty and self-sacrifice.

THE END.

ROUTLEDGE'S EXCELSIOR SERIES

OF STANDARD AUTHORS,

Without Abridgment, Crown 8vo, 2s. each, in cloth.

- 1 The Wide, Wide World, by Miss Wetherell.
- 2 Melbourne House, by Miss Wetherell.
- 3 The Lamplighter, by Miss Cummins.
- 4 Stepping Heavenward, and Aunt Jane's Hero, by E. Prentiss.
- 5 Queechy, by Miss Wetherell.
- 6 Ellen Montgomery's Bookshelf, by Miss Wetherell.
- 7 The Two School Girls, and other Tales, illustrating the Beatitudes, by Miss Wetherell.
- 8 Helen, by Maria Edgeworth.
- 9 The Old Helmet, by Miss Wetherell.
- 10 Mabel Vaughan, by Miss Cummins.
- 11 The Glen Luna Family, or Speculation, by Miss Wetherell.
- 12 The Word, or Walks from Eden, by Miss Wetherell.
- 13 Alone, by Marion Harland.
- 14 The Lofty and Lowly, by Miss M'Intosh.
- 15 Prince of the House of David, by Rev. J. H. Ingraham.
- 16 Uncle Tom's Cabin, by Mrs. Stowe, with a Preface by the Earl of Carlisle.
- 17 Longfellow's Poetical Works, 726 pages, with Portrait.
- 18 Burns's Poetical Works, with Memoir by Willmott.
- 19 Moore's Poetical Works, with Memoir by Howitt.
- 20 Byron's Poetical Works, Selections from Don Juan.
- 21 Pope's Poetical Works, Edited by the Rev. H. F. Cary, with a Memoir
- 22 Wise Sayings of the Great and Good, with Classified Index of Subjects
- 23 Lover's Poetical Works.
- 24 Bret Harte's Poems.
- 25 Mrs. Hemans' Poetical Works.
- 26 Coleridge's Poetical Works, with Memoir by W. B. Scott.
- 27 Dodd's Beauties of Shakspeare.
- 28 Hood's Poetical Works, Serious and Comic, 456 pages.
- 29 The Book of Familiar Quotations, from the Best Authors.
- 30 Shelley's Poetical Works, with Memoir by W. B. Scott.
- 31 Keats' Poetical Works, with Memoir by W. B. Scott.
- 32 Shakspeare Gems. Extracts, specially designed for Youth.
- 33 The Book of Humour, Wit, and Wisdom, a Manual of Table Talk.
- 34 E. A. Poe's Poetical Works, with Memoir by R. H. Stoddard.
- 35 L. E. L., The Poetical Works of (Letitia Elizabeth Landon). With Memoir by W. B. Scott.
- 37 Sir Walter Scott's Poetical Works, with Memoir.
- 38 Shakspeare, complete, with Poems and Sonnets, edited by Charles Knight.
- 39 Cowper's Poetical Works.
- 40 Milton's Poetical Works, from the Text of Dr. Newton.
- 41 Sacred Poems, Devotional and Moral.
- 42 Sydney Smith's Essays, from the *Edinburgh Review*.
- 43 Choice Poems and Lyrics, from 130 Poets.

[continued.]

ROUTLEDGE'S EXCELSIOR SERIES—continued.

- 44 Cruden's Concordance to the Old and New Testament, edited by Rev. C. S. Carey, 572 pp., 3 cols. on a page.
- 45 Tales of a Wayside Inn, by H. W. Longfellow, complete edition.
- 46 Dante's Inferno, translated by H. W. Longfellow, with extensive Notes.
- 49 Household Stories, collected by the Brothers Grimm, newly translated, comprises nearly 200 Tales in 564 pp.
- 50 Fairy Tales and Stories, by Hans Christian Andersen, translated by Dr. H. W. Dulcken, 85 Tales in 575 pages.
- 51 Foxe's Book of Martyrs, abridged from Milner's Large Edition, by Theodore Alois Buckley.
- 52 Sir Walter Scott's Tales of a Grandfather, being Stories taken from Scottish History, unabridged, 640 pages.
- 53 The Boy's Own Book of Natural History, by the Rev. J. G. Wood, M.A., 400 illustrations.
- 54 Robinson Crusoe, with 52 plates by J. D. Watson.
- 55 George Herbert's Works, in Prose and Verse, edited by the Rev. R. A. Willmott.
- 56 Gulliver's Travels into several Remote Regions of the World, by Jonathan Swift.
- 57 Captain Cook's Three Voyages Round the World, with a Sketch of his Life, by Lieut. C. R. Low, 512 pages.
- 59 Walton and Cotton's Complete Angler, with additions and notes by the Angling Correspondent of the *Illustrated London News*, many illustrations.
- 60 Campbell's Poetical Works.
- 61 Lamb's Tales from Shakspeare.
- 62 Comic Poets of the Nineteenth Century.
- 63 The Arabian Night's Entertainments.
- 64 The Adventures of Don Quixote.
- 65 The Adventures of Gil Blas, translated by Smollett.
- 66 Pope's Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, complete in one vol.
- 67 Defoe's Journal of the Plague Year and Some Account of the Great Fire in London.
- 68 Wordsworth's Poetical Works.
- 69 Goldsmith, Smollett, Johnson, and Shenstone, in 1 vol.
- 70 Edgeworth's Moral Tales and Popular Tales, in 1 vol.
- 71 The Seven Champions of Christendom.
- 72 The Pillar of Fire, by Rev. J. H. Ingraham.
- 73 The Throne of David, by Rev. J. H. Ingraham.
- 74 Barriers Burned Away, by the Rev. E. P. Roe.
- 75 Southey's Poetical Works.
- 76 Chaucer's Poems.
- 77 The Book of British Ballads, edited by S. C. Hall.
- 78 Sandford and Merton, with 60 illustrations.
- 79 The Swiss Family Robinson, with 60 illustrations.
- 80 Todd's Student's Manual.
- 81 Hawker's Morning Portion.
- 82 Hawker's Evening Portion.
- 83 Holmes' (O. W.) Poetical Works.
- 84 Evenings at Home, with 60 illustrations.
- 85 Opening a Chestnut Burr, by the Rev. E. P. Roe.
- 86 What can She do? by the Rev. E. P. Roe.
- 87 Lowell's Poetical Works.
- 88 Sir Edward Seaward's Narrative of his Shipwreck.
- 89 Robin Hood Ballads, edited by Ritson.

ROUTLEDGE'S STANDARD LIBRARY,

Crown 8vo, cloth, 3s. 6d. each.

- 1 The Arabian Nights, Unabridged, 8 plates.
- 2 Don Quixote, Unabridged.
- 3 Gil Blas, Adventures of, Unabridged.
- 4 Curiosities of Literature, by Isaac D'Israeli, Complete Edition.
- 5 A Thousand and One Gems of British Poetry.
- 6 The Blackfriars Shakspeare, edited by Charles Knight.
- 7 Cruden's Concordance, by Carey.
- 8 Boswell's Life of Dr. Johnson.
- 9 The Works of Oliver Goldsmith.
- 11 The Family Doctor, 500 woodcuts.
- 12 Sterne's Works, Complete.
- 13 Ten Thousand Wonderful Things.
- 14 Extraordinary Popular Delusions, by Dr. Mackay.
- 16 Bartlett's Familiar Quotations.
- 17 The Spectator, by Addison, &c. Unabridged.
- 18 Routledge's Modern Speaker—Comic—Serious—Dramatic.
- 19 One Thousand and One Gems of Prose, edited by C. Mackay.
- 20 Pope's Homer's Iliad and Odyssey.
- 23 Josephus, translated by Whiston.
- 24 Book of Proverbs, Phrases, Quotations, and Mottoes.
- 25 The Book of Modern Anecdotes—Theatrical, Legal, and American.
- 26 Book of Table Talk, W. C. Russell.
- 27 Junius, Woodfall's edition.
- 28 Charles Lamb's Works.
- 29 Froissart's Chronicles. [mation.
- 30 D'Aubigne's Story of the Reformation.
- 31 A History of England, by the Rev. James White.
- 32 Macaulay—Selected Essays, Miscellaneous Writings.
- 33 Carleton's Traits, 1st series.
- 34 ——— 2nd series.
- 35 Essays by Sydney Smith.
- 36 Dante. Longfellow's translation.
- 51 Prescott's Biographical and Critical Essays.
- 52 Napier's History of the Peninsular War, 1807-10. 53—1810-12.
- 54 White's Natural History of Selborne, with many illustrations.
- 55 Dean Milman's History of the Jews.
- 56 Percy's Reliques of Ancient Poetry.
- 57 Chaucer's Poetical Works.
- 58 Longfellow's Prose Works.
- 59 Spenser's Poetical Works.
- 60 Asmodeus, by Le Sage.
- 61 Book of British Ballads, S. C. Hall.
- 62 Plutarch's Lives (Langhorne's ed.)
- 64 Book of Epigrams, W. D. Adams.
- 65 Longfellow's Poems (Comp. ed.)
- 66 Lempriere's Classical Dictionary.
- 67 Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations.
- 68 Father Prout's Works, edited by C. Kent.
- 69 Carleton's Traits and Stories. Complete in one volume.
- 70 Walker's Rhyming Dictionary.
- 71 Macfarlane's Hist. of British India.
- 72 Defoe's Journal of the Plague and the Great Fire of London, with illustrations on steel by George Cruikshank.
- 73 Glimpses of the Past, by C. Knight.
- 74 Michaud's History of the Crusades, vol. 1.
- 75 ——— vol. 2. 76 ——— vol. 3.
- 77 A Thousand and One Gems of Song, edited by C. Mackay.
- 78 Motley's Rise of the Dutch Republic. [Complete.
- 79 Prescott's Ferdinand and Isabella.
- 80 ——— Conquest of Mexico. Comp.
- 81 ——— Conquest of Peru. Comp.
- 82 ——— Charles the Fifth.
- 83 ——— Philip the Second. Vols. 1 and 2 in 1 vol.
- 84 ——— Vol. 3 and Essays in 1 vol.
- 85 Jeremy Taylor's Life of Christ.
- 86 Traditions of Lancashire, by John Roby, vol. 1. 87 ——— vol. 2.
- 88 "The Breakfast Table Series"—The Autocrat—The Professor—The Poet—by Oliver Wendell Holmes, with steel portrait.
- 89 Romaine's Life, Walk, and Triumph of Faith.
- 90 Napier's History of the Peninsular War, 1812-14. [tion.
- 91 Hawker's Poor Man's Daily Port.
- 92 Chevreul on Colour, with 8 coloured plates.
- 93 Shakspeare, edited by C. Knight, large type edition, with full-page illustrations, vol. 1.
- 94 ——— vol. 2. 95 ——— vol. 3.
- 96 The Spectator, large type ed., vol. 1.
- 97 ——— vol. 2. 98 ——— vol. 3.
- 99 R. W. Emerson's Complete Works.
- 100 Boswell's Life of Johnson and Tour to the Hebrides, vol. 1.
- 101 ——— vol. 2. 102 ——— vol. 3.
- 103 S. Knowles' Dramatic Works.
- 104 Roscoe's (W.) Lorenzo de Medici.
- 105 ——— (W.) Life of Leo X., vol. 1.
- 106 ——— ——— vol. 2.
- 107 Berington's Literary History of the Middle Ages.

PEARS' SOAP

A SPECIALTY FOR THE COMPLEXION

*Recommended by SIR ERASMUS WILSON, F.R.S., late President
of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, as*

"The most refreshing and agreeable of balms for the skin."

MDME. ADELINA PATTI writes :—"I have
found PEAR'S SOAP *matchless for the hands
and complexion.*"

MRS. LANGTRY writes :—"Since using PEAR'S
SOAP for the hands and complexion, *I have
discarded all others.*"

MDME. MARIE ROZE (*Prima Donna, Her
Majesty's Theatre*) writes :—"For preserving
the complexion, keeping the skin soft, free
from redness and roughness, and the hands in
nice condition, PEAR'S SOAP *is the finest
preparation in the world.*"

MISS MARY ANDERSON writes :—"I have
used PEAR'S SOAP for two years with the
greatest satisfaction, for *I find it the very best.*"

PEARS' SOAP—SOLD EVERYWHERE

